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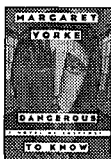
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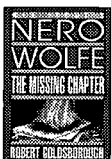
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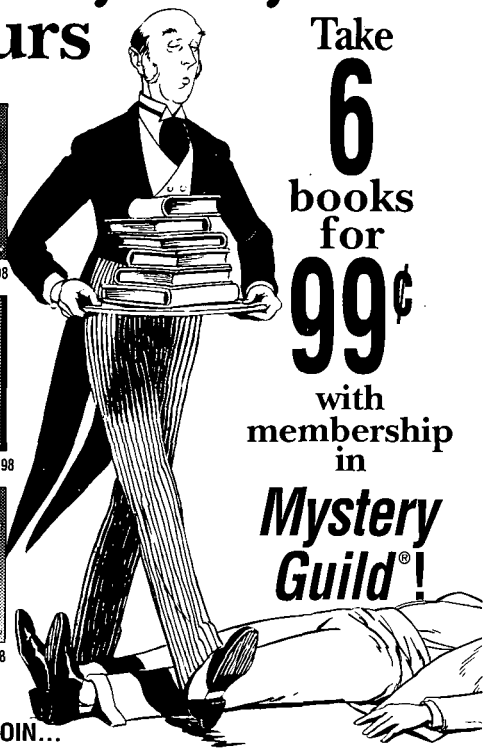
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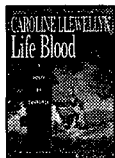
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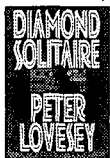
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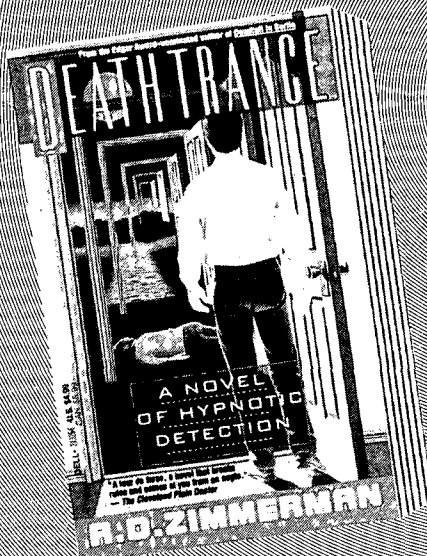
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Why editors often have a dazed look (remember that survey we did last fall?):

"I seldom like the stories, but I *love* the Unsolved puzzle."

"I enjoy your magazine, but I dislike [series] stories about the same P.I."

"Too clean. Getting repetitious."

"If stories continue to feature illicit sex, I won't renew my subscription."

"Like Polijn best."

"Polijn sucks."

"I love *Ellery Queen* magazine format."

"Surveys like this don't really mean much."

"[Not very interesting are] stories of ancient Japan, where servants and warriors are central characters."

"I hate the Mystery Classics!"

"I love the Mystery Classics."

"I don't like pictures with captions, as in [double] issues. Otherwise, I love this magazine!"

"Too many cute stories. 'Aunt Sara's Favors'? Puhlease."

"Like lighter short stories with some humor (like 'Aunt Sara's Favors')."

"I thoroughly enjoy your stories that end with a twist."

"In the past four to six years, your magazine has stopped having an abundance of horror/mystery stories with the traditional Hitchcockian twist. I miss that!"

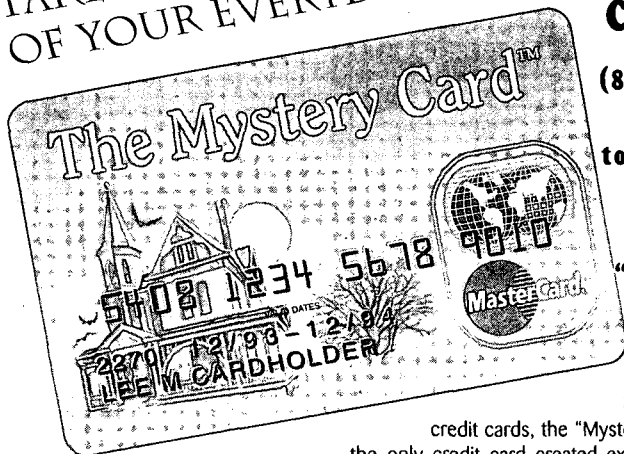
"I like the difference between AHMM and EQMM. Subtle but

(continued on page 158)

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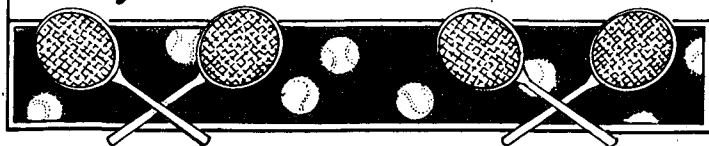
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THE TENNIS COURT

by Brenda Melton Burnham



I settle into the familiar contours of the wicker chair as the first sliver of sun appears over the eastern mountains. The screen door squeals its usual complaint, and Leah steps onto the porch, her entire concentration focused on the tray in her hands.

She arrives at the table and sets her burden down without spilling it, always a triumph to be savored, then pours my coffee and hands me the mug before dropping into the chair beside me. She reminds

me of myself at twelve, all legs and eagerness; physically racing to catch up with her mind while emotionally still clinging to childhood.

"Gonna be another hot day," Leah says, using her grownup voice as she picks up her glass of milk.

"A scorcher," I agree.

We sip our refreshments in our best tea party manner. I can usually last longer than my granddaughter at this game of Let's Pretend; I've had years of adulthood in which to practice.

Sixty yards in front of us, across the slope of grass turning brown in the August heat, the men of the family bend their energies—and their backs—to the cause of tearing out the old tennis court. The noise of the heavy jackhammers echoes against the foothills.

"I was your age when my grandfather built this court," I say, even though I know I've said it many times before.

Nineteen forty-two saw countries at war and families in turmoil. Our family was no different. My father and Uncle Theo joined the army in the spring. When they left for training, my mother and my aunt packed up their children and returned here, to their father's farm.

I fell asleep to the sound of my mother and her three sisters as they laughed and talked among themselves. I woke in the morning to the same sounds—as though they had continued, unceasing, throughout the night. Bras and panties hung from the clothesline in the mud room. Lipsticks and powder lay atop the dresser scarves, next to the old inlaid brushes and tortoiseshell combs. Chinese checkers and dominoes decorated the side table in the living room, always ready and waiting for a quick game.

In the early mornings, before the sun reached the valley, my grandfather went fishing on the river at the back of the farm. Often one or more of his daughters accompanied him as they had done when they were young.

In the evenings, after dinner, we sat on the porch to catch the air and listen to Gabriel Heater on the radio. I helped turn the crank on the ice cream maker. We watched my seven-year-old sister and Aunt Marge's five-year-old twins chase fireflies.

Always, *always* my grandfather had dominated this house, these lives. Even when he wasn't present, his shadow was. But 1942, in the Krueger household, was to be the year of the women.

"C'mon, Sonia," they would call to me. "If you want to go with us you'd better hurry."

And of course I wanted to go with them. Every morning I examined my flat child's chest for signs of a bosom. I tried to brush my hair in a pageboy the way Aunt Trudy, the youngest of the sisters, did. Aunt Inga taught me to play cribbage and the strategy for winning at dominoes. Aunt Marge showed me how to use her nail polish. My mother let me stay up after the younger kids had been put to bed.

"I'm coming," I would call with one last glance in the mirror.

"Have you got the rackets, Inga?"

"Don't forget the balls this time, Liz."

Every afternoon we headed for the park in town where I watched my sister and the twins while the four women played tennis. I had never realized how beautiful they were with their blonde hair and white teeth and strong, healthy bodies.

Soldiers and civilian personnel from the nearby military base realized it as well. There was always a contingent of them waiting to challenge the Krueger women. My mother, Marge, and Inga had no favorites and soundly defeated most comers, but Trudy was soft on a thin, dark, intense young man named Ira Glass.

It was a day like all other days as we headed home. Early June, perhaps, when the sun still promised a summer that would last forever. The car seats burned the backs of my legs, and my throat tasted of dust. The other women were teasing Trudy.

"You should've had that last point, Trudy. Don't give away the game just because you give away your heart."

"Tennis matches start with love. They don't always end that way."

"Oh, Ira, my wonderful one."

Trudy protested loudly and they all laughed.

When we got home, Grandfather waited on the porch. "Where have you been?" he shouted in German.

"Speak English, Poppa," Marge said.

"Playing tennis," Inga said. "At the park."

"Tramps! Strumpets! Parading yourselves in front of those men!"

"Oh, Poppa, don't be ridiculous," my mother said.

I huddled back with the little kids, trying to be ignored.

"Was it hot that summer, Gram?" Leah asks.

"Hotter even than now," I reply.

The heavy pounding of the jackhammers ceases just as the sun pops over the ridge. My daughter comes out of the house with a pitcher of lemonade to refresh the laboring men before they begin the effort of removing the moss-stained chunks of concrete.

Trudy had worked as a druggist's assistant in town and Inga as a secretary. Within a week of each other they were fired from their jobs. I was shooed from the room both times and was forced to listen at the door.

"... a sympathizer," Trudy sobbed.

"Silly man," my mother said.

"If only Poppa wouldn't insist on aggravating them."

"They're afraid," Marge scoffed. "That's all. It's the war."

"Besides," Inga said, "it gives us more time to be together."

And always the young men waited at the courts. More and more now Trudy and Ira were a pair. He gave her a pin, a gold tennis racket with a tiny ball of glittering stones. She gave him a silver ring she'd worn as a child; he wore it on a chain around his neck.

Some nights Trudy slipped out the side door after everyone had gone to bed, and I knew she went to meet Ira. I discovered this by accident one night when I got up to go to the bathroom. When I came out, my mother was waiting in the hall.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing. Go back to bed."

"But I saw Trudy..."

My mother focused a hard look on me. "Yes? What did you see?"

"Nothing."

My mother put her arm around my shoulder and kissed the top of my head. "It isn't easy growing up, *liebchen*," she murmured into my hair.

"Were you happy that summer?" my granddaughter asks.

"Oh yes," I reply. "Yes, I was happy."

Throughout the whole time my grandmother cooked. A short, round woman, she left the sanctuary of her kitchen only to feed her precious birds, calling to them in her native tongue. "Come, my pretty ones, come see what I have for you. Come, come."

July days melted one into the other. The temperature continued to soar. My grandfather seemed to shrivel with the heat while the women plumped out and grew taller and stronger. On the court

their faces shone with perspiration. The tennis dresses whipped around their thighs. They were Valkyries . . . Amazons. I thought they were indomitable.

One day, as we walked to the car, a woman ran up and spat in Inga's face. "Nazi bitch!" she screamed, her face twisting with the ugly words.

Inga calmly wiped her cheek with the towel she had been carrying while my mother and Marge marched along beside her, their expressions closed and inscrutable. Trudy and I and the little kids stumbled alongside, silent with shock.

Another time, as we were driving past, a gang of boys threw rocks at us.

"You mustn't let it upset you, Sonia," Marge said to me. "They don't know who to take their anger out on."

"But we're Americans. Aren't we?"

"Of course we are."

"Even though some people forget it," Inga added.

"Were you surprised when your grandpa decided to build the tennis court?" Leah asks.

"You might say that," I acknowledge.

Out on the lawn the men finish their lemonade and bend to their labors once again. They tie handkerchiefs about their heads to keep the sweat out of their eyes. Their bodies glisten with moisture.

When we came down to breakfast that morning in early August, Grandfather was outside, astride his tractor. Behind him the huge discs chopped up the once-green lawn.

"What's he doing?"

"What in the world . . ."

"He's tearing up the whole yard."

"You want to play tennis, *ja*?" he called out to them. "Fine. I build you a tennis court."

The women looked at each other and said things with their eyes.

The next day the Gruener brothers arrived and agreed to pour a concrete slab when Grandfather had the ground ready.

"Does this mean we won't be going to town any more?" I asked. The women glared at me.

"No need," Grandfather said.

Our outings took on a desperate air those last days.

"We can always invite people over to play," Inga suggested.

"Can't you see it?" Marge said. "Poppa standing at the gate, checking everyone as they come through?" She laughed.

"He'll never let Ira come," Trudy said. She nibbled at the corners of her stubby red fingertips.

Her sisters didn't answer.

"Oh god, what'll I do?" she cried out.

"Everyone must've been pretty excited," Leah remarks.

"It was a pretty exciting time."

Already the heat is building. In front of us, their muscles bulge as the younger men load the concrete pieces on the flatbed truck.

Every day Grandfather worked, harrowing, leveling, then building the forms for the concrete slabs. Every day the women's voices grew shriller.

"You really needn't tear up the yard like this for us," my mother, being the eldest, said at dinner. "Why don't you put in a flowerbed for Momma?"

"Momma has enough flowerbeds."

"We don't mind going into town."

"Even when someone spits on you?"

The women darted glances at one another. "We do have friends there," Marge said.

"Invite them here."

"Poppa," my mother said, "we *like* going to the park."

"I will not have my family spit on." Grandfather's fist crashed onto the table. Dishes rattled. One of the twins began to cry. Grandmother decided to make coffee cake so it would be ready for breakfast the next morning. "I will not have my daughters behaving like sluts. Do you hear me? You will play here or you will play nowhere."

Trudy jumped up and ran from the room.

In town the next day Trudy and Ira took the car while the others played tennis. Afterwards, as we were driving home, she said, "It's decided. We'll go tonight and be married over in Slocum County." Her eyes glittered, and she bit her lip nervously.

"Trudy, are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I love him. He loves me."

"Then bring him home. Poppa will give in when he knows you're serious."

"No. He won't. And you know it. He still has one foot on German soil."

"But you can't sneak off . . ."

"If you don't want to help me, you don't have to. I'll do it by myself."

"We'll help you," Inga said.

"I'll bet you couldn't wait until the court was finished, right?" Leah prompts.

"It seemed to happen very fast." I close my eyes and let the heat seep into my bones.

"How do I look?" Trudy twirled, fluffing her hair, showing off her soft white dress. The little gold racket pin gleamed at her breast.

"You look beautiful," I said. The others nodded.

They all hugged each other, then my mother and Trudy slipped out the bedroom door and down the dark stairs. I rushed to the window and watched my youngest aunt disappear across the lawn.

And saw the other figure step out of the barn behind her.

"Someone else is out there," I whispered.

The others rushed over. "You're seeing things, *liebchen*," Inga said.

"No, no, I'm not!"

The door opened and my mother came in, her face pale. "Poppa was waiting by the barn. He's following her. He must've known about them all along."

"How could he know?"

"How did he know about the spitting? It's a small town. I tell you he knows."

"What'll we do?"

"What can we do?"

"Why didn't you go after her?"

"It was too late." My mother shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "It was too late the minute Trudy stepped out the door."

We sat in the silent bedroom and waited, our ears straining to hear a strange noise among the night sounds, afraid to speak for fear of missing it.

There was no missing it when it came. Trudy raced back across the wet grass, slamming the screen door behind her, pounding up the stairs and into the room. Her hair hung in tangles. A huge red

mark ran across her cheek. Dark stains covered her dress. The bodice was ripped and the tiny pin gone.

"Oh, Liz," she cried, "I'll never see him again," and fell into my mother's arms.

"Trudy, did you and Ira—" Inga paused. "You aren't pre—"

Marge turned to me, bumping Inga with her elbow. "Go to bed, Sonia."

"But I want . . ."

"Go to bed," my mother said.

"I still don't understand why you never played tennis, Gram," my granddaughter says.

One of the men—is it Max? or Charley? I can't tell—stops digging and kneels to work at the dirt with his hands.

I never heard Grandfather come back. I woke late the next morning. No air moved through the silent house. Dressing was an effort. My clothes felt heavy on my body as I walked down the stairs. Mother and Marge and Inga were down by the dock. My sister and the twins dug ditches in the mud, something they weren't normally allowed to do. The women talked of the heat and answered the little kids' questions about bugs and dirt and trees. From the front yard we could hear the sounds of the Gruener brothers pouring the concrete slab for the tennis court.

"I've always hated this court," I whisper. To Leah? To myself? To the past? "Always."

The kneeling man—it is Max; I can see the bright cloth tied about his head—calls to the other men. They gather around him. I hear their exclamations but can't make out the words.

My mother discovered Trudy's body when she went upstairs to check on her. The coroner's report said "suicide while of an unsound mind." It was assumed she had gotten the sleeping pills when she was working at the drugstore.

Two MP's from the army base came to the house a week later. Ira Glass had gone AWOL, and they were trying to locate him.

"But I don't understand," Leah persists, her eyes full of the innocence of youth. "If you hated it so much, why did you wait until now to tear it out?"

All the men scrape at the earth with their hands.
"Pour me another cup of coffee, will you, dear?" I say.

The morning the heat wave broke, my mother and Inga went fishing with my grandfather. When the boat returned to the dock two hours later, only the women were aboard. They came ashore silently, their backs erect, their wet clothes dripping on the soft green grass.

"Poppa had a strike and had started to reel it in," they said, "when he dropped his pole and clutched at his chest.

"He must've had a heart attack," they said.

"It was overboard before we could catch him," they said.

"He was downstream where the current was strongest. That was where he always liked to fish, you remember," they said.

"We went in to help him, but he never came up," they said.

The police decided against dragging the river. His body surfaced four days later several miles away. He was buried in the family plot next to Trudy.

They're all gone now . . . Trudy . . . Mother . . . Marge. Inga, who never married, died a week ago. After the funeral I asked my son Karl and my son-in-law Max, Leah's father, both stalwart, upright men, to tear out the tennis court.

Now the men walk up to the porch in a group. They let Karl lead.

"We found—" he begins, then stops to take a deep breath. "There were bones under the concrete, Mother." He holds out something. "And this." A set of dog tags. And a tiny silver ring.

I take the small objects in my hands. They are still cool from the dark, damp soil. I am aware of so many things. The heat from the sun, the river singing in the distance. The contours of the old wicker chair. Of debts owed and the debts paid.

My granddaughter, unusual for her, sits silent beside me.

"Mother," Karl says softly, fearful of startling me. "We'd better call the police, don't you think?" He looks at me. Waits. A good son.

"Yes," I answer. "You're right. We must."

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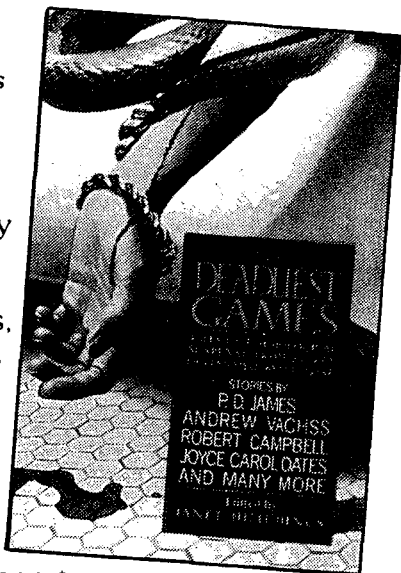
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FICTION

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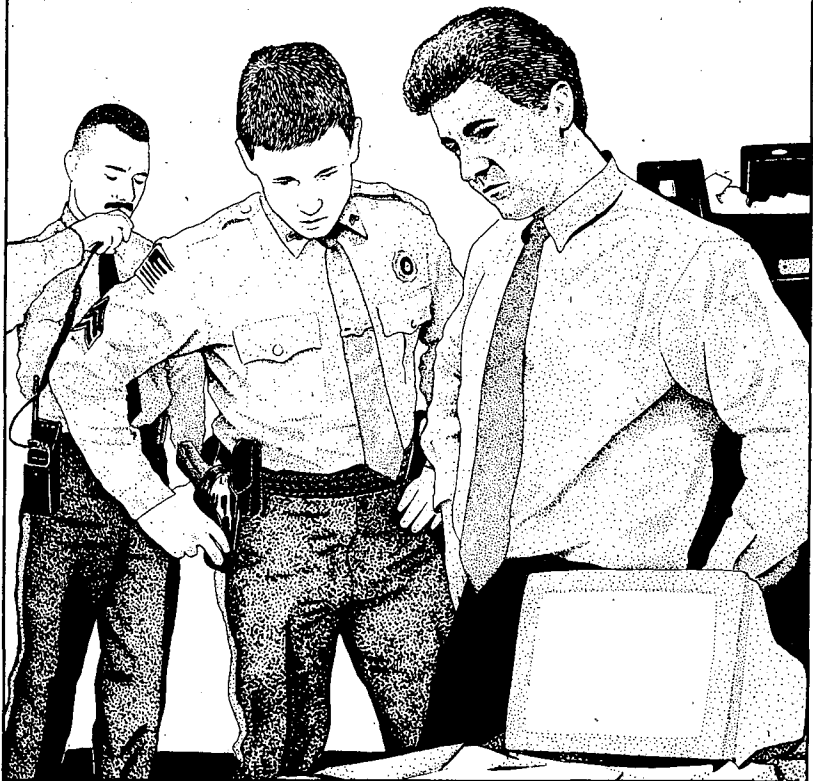


Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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The phone rang. I slapped the alarm clock a couple of times before I realized that wasn't going to stop the noise. I fumbled for the phone.

"Yeah," I grunted.

"Ross Ward?"

"Yeah."

"You are the executive director of ANGSTA?"

"Thanks, but I knew that already." It wasn't easy to be clever at two o'clock Sunday morning.

"This is Detective Logan with the D.C. police department. There's been a break-in at your offices. Can you come down here right away?"

ANGSTA—the American Natural Gas Sales and Transport Association—had been cobbled together by several natural gas pipeline companies that were unhappy with the representation they were getting from the older and more venerable industry associations like AGA and INGAA. I had become executive director only a month earlier, in July, 1985.

After a long career on Capitol Hill as a staffer to various senators and congressmen, I had found myself middle-aged and without two nickels to rub together. So when I saw the opportunity to cash in all that Hill experience and join the

other side as a lobbyist, I jumped at it.

Despite the fact that pretty nearly everybody in the country is a member, employee, or fellow traveler of at least one, and usually more, of the so-called special interests that lobbyists represent, lobbyists are everybody's favorite Washington villains, even ahead of congressmen. Most lobbyists don't lose much sleep over being villains. Their six-digit salaries and handsome expense accounts are a great comfort on long winter nights. That was the kind of comfort I was looking for when I decided on my career change. Like most of my career moves, it didn't work out very well.

I hadn't fully realized quite how shaky ANGSTA was when I took the job, but I found out within the first month. Settling into my new K Street office, I felt like I had died and gone to Beverly Hills. The surface area of my highly polished Danish modern desk was not quite as large as the floor of the office I had recently vacated in the cramped and grimy quarters of the Russell Senate Office Building, and I only sank up to the ankles in my plush beige carpet, but it was more luxurious than anything I had been used to. The cost of such amenities, I found when I was going

over the books, was more than ANGSTA could afford.

My first recommendation to the Board of Directors was to look for less ostentatious office space. It turned out the directors had had their own idea about how to effect economies, and I was it. They were paying me only about half what they had paid my predecessor, a retired vice-president of public affairs from one of the member companies who had spent most of his time at Burning Tree running up his expense account. And, part two of their budget plan, my first assignment was to fire the legislative director of the association and take on his duties myself.

One month and I was already facing job burn-out. It wasn't as though I had never fired anyone before, but I can't say I had ever enjoyed it. And I especially didn't enjoy firing someone who, so far as I knew, was doing a good job. Nevertheless—and this is a confession of human failing—I liked the look of my bank balance, having received my first paycheck, and I wasn't secure enough to challenge my new employers.

At two thirty Sunday morning the ANGSTA office suite was crawling with cops. Nothing obvious had been taken. The office of John Jacobson, our

former legislative director, had been hurriedly picked over. The computer was turned on, desk and file drawers were opened, and some files were stacked on the floor. Also on the floor, a nickel-plated, .32 automatic clutched in his right hand, was John Jacobson.

On the computer screen was a suicide note.

While the forensic crew measured, photographed, and dusted the scene for fingerprints, a homicide detective interviewed me in my office. Detective Logan was a burly man in his mid-fifties wearing a cheap suit about a size too small. He seemed to be ready to believe that Jacobson was a suicide. Less paperwork for him, no doubt.

"Look," Logan said, glancing at his steno pad, "Jacobson left a note. He had just been fired, he was over forty, his wife had divorced him less than a year ago. His life was a mess. He was depressed."

"He didn't seem depressed when I fired him. He was angry."

"Angry, depressed. It's close enough. Anger can be a symptom of depression. Anyway, he said he was depressed in the note. What I don't understand is why he set off the security alarm."

"I can explain that," I said, reaching in my pocket and dangling the alarm key. "He didn't have the key to shut off the alarm. Once he opened the door, the alarm was going to go off in thirty seconds, no matter what."

Logan made a note in his steno pad. "When did you last see Jacobson?"

"Friday morning, when I fired him."

"Where has he been since then?"

"I have no idea."

"Guess."

"Well, I had my receptionist leave a message for him on his home answering machine. Ted Chapman wanted to talk to him."

"Who's Chapman?"

"The vice-president for public affairs of AmGasCo."

"What did he want to talk to Jacobson about?"

"I don't know."

"Where can I find Chapman?"

"He's staying in the AmGasCo suite at the Capitol Hilton."

Logan made a note on his pad, flipped it shut, and slipped it in his jacket pocket as he stood up. He handed me a card. "You can reach me at that number if anything else turns up," he said, pivoting on his

heel and walking out. Gracious manners.

I hung around in my office while the forensic boys finished up their work, but I didn't accomplish anything. I couldn't concentrate. The scene with Jacobson in my office on Friday kept replaying in my mind. His anger had been a symptom, all right, but of something much more specific than depression. Something was eating him, and not just his personal problems.

Friday morning, I had called John Jacobson on the very nice carpet in my office. He was a little below average height, fortyish, balding, unprepossessing. He had been around Washington for awhile, and I had met him before coming to ANGSTA, but I didn't know him well. Those who did said his appearance was deceptive. He was lean, wiry, and played a mean game of racquetball. He also had a quick, dry wit that was camouflaged by his quiet, flat, Midwestern voice.

He fidgeted, as anyone might who was called in to see the new boss.

"Have a seat, John," I said, fidgeting myself with the personnel file on the desk before me.

"That bad, huh?" he said with a wry smile, sinking into the leather armchair.

"As you know," I began lamely, "the gas business is in trouble. Too much supply, not enough demand. The motto used to be 'Stay alive till '85,' then the supply bubble would burst..."

"Cut the crap, Ross! I was in the gas business when you were bagman for a senator. Get to the point." Veins popping on his forehead, he turned bright red right up to his receding hairline.

"You're fired." That was the point, after all.

"You bastards! You crooked sonsabitches!" He leapt up, punted my wastebasket across the room, and stalked off toward the door.

"Do you want to hear about the severance benefits?" His attitude was making the dismissal process easier for me to take.

He slammed the door behind him.

If I hadn't been so annoyed, I would have been flabbergasted. Jacobson's reaction went against everything I had heard about him. Soft-spoken? Quiet, dry wit? Why the gratuitous insult? Bagman? The average lobbyist would bite his tongue in half before saying that kind of thing. Bastards? Sonsabitches? Me and who else? The Board of Directors?

I didn't have time to worry about it then. I had an appointment on Capitol Hill.

About five thirty A.M. the cop who had been directing the forensic team popped into my office. "The deceased has been taken to the morgue. We've made a printout of the suicide note for our file, and I'm going to seal the office for the time being. Is there anything you need out of there?"

"I can't think of anything at the moment."

"Well, if you need to get in there, call me at this number." He handed me a card, and I put it in my pocket with Logan's.

Four hours later, I was sweating in the morning sun on the terrace of the American Cafe on Massachusetts Avenue NE, at a table for two. I occupied one chair; the other strained under the weight of the Sunday edition of the *Washington Post*. After the cops had left, I had gone home, had tried to sleep, couldn't, got up, showered, dressed, and went out for breakfast.

About the only exercise I got in those days was lifting the *Post* on Sundays and hauling it the eight blocks from my house to the American Cafe. Not a bad workout.

I had polished off my eggs Benedict—which, by the way,

they serve on a croissant, what's so American about that?—and, sipping my third mimosa, I thought over the events of the preceding Friday.

When I had returned to the office in midafternoon, Jacobson was gone. Betty, our receptionist, said he had packed some stuff in a box and left around noon. He hadn't said where he was going or when he would be back. Apparently, he hadn't mentioned to Betty that he had been laid off.

I went into his office and looked around. He had taken the most obvious personal effects—framed degrees and certificates, autographed photos of him with various senators and congressmen, a pipé rack and humidor with pipes and tobacco that I had never seen him use. Otherwise the office seemed untouched. The furniture, telephone, computer, a box of computer diskettes, reference books, bound volumes of *Congressional Quarterly* and *National Journal*, even stationery, pads, pens, and pencils that had been paid for by the association remained in the office. The two-drawer file cabinet to the left of the desk still had files in it, with no obvious gaps to suggest Jacobson had taken any of the association's business away with him.

But then he still had his key to the office. It might be too soon to give him high marks for honesty.

I figured that after cooling off over the weekend, he would come back, collect his severance check, and clear up other odds and ends of business. Then I would offer to write him a glowing letter of recommendation, and we would part friends. Maybe I could even talk with some of my contacts on the Hill to see if there was a suitable opening for him.

Back in my office, I had settled into the paperwork that I had neglected all afternoon when Betty buzzed me on the intercom to tell me that Ted Chapman of AmGasCo was there to see me. Since the CEO of AmGasCo, Lloyd Braxton, was also the chairman of ANGSTA, I made time for Ted whenever he showed up.

"How's everything in Houston?" I asked as he came in.

"Hot. Sticky."

"Like Washington."

"Only more so."

It was a ritual greeting we always went through in the hot, humid weather that afflicted both cities in the summertime. I had known Ted for ten or twelve years. He used to live in Washington when he was director of government relations for AmGasCo. Then

they put him in charge of public relations as well as government relations, made him a veep, and moved him to corporate headquarters in Houston, where he had been for the past five years.

Ted's ascent of the corporate ladder had been one for the record books. As a lobbyist he had had a string of legislative victories by the time he was thirty, and he had made corporate v.p. when he was under thirty-five. He had a keen political sense that had served him well, not only as a lobbyist, but also as an intramural politician at AmGasCo.

Our ritual greeting was the extent of his small talk. Ted perched on the edge of the leather sofa to the right of my desk and came directly to the point.

"Have you given Jacobson his notice?"

"Yeah. He took it pretty hard."

"Well, it's a bad time to be out of a job."

"Name me a good time."

Ted settled back on the sofa and stared out the window. There wasn't much to see. Just the tops of some trees along the esplanade.

"Where is he now?" Ted asked.

"Jacobson? I don't know. He

stormed out of here and hasn't been seen since."

"Well, if you see him, tell him to call me. I might be able to help him out. I'm staying in the company suite at the Capitol Hilton. I'll be in town through Monday."

Ted got up and left. He had seemed a bit distracted, but I didn't think any more about it. I got back to work, and before long Betty popped into my office to say that it was five thirty and she was leaving, unless I had anything more for her to do. I told her to call Jacobson at home and let him know that Ted Chapman wanted to talk to him.

"Ted was in his office," she said. "He left him a note."

"Call him anyway," I said.

A couple of hours later, I was ready to leave. Betty had left a note for me in the box on her desk where she put her phone messages. Jacobson had not been at home, but she had left the message to call Chapman on his answering machine.

I was about to walk out the door when it occurred to me that it might be wise to be more cautious than usual about security. After all, there was a disgruntled former employee out there who had a key to the office.

We had an alarm system, and if it was turned on, some-

one coming through the door, even with a key, had thirty seconds to get to the box and turn off the system with another key or the alarm would sound. We usually left the key to the alarm system in the box. That way, whoever got to the office first in the morning could just go to the box and turn off the alarm. It sort of defeated the purpose of the system, but we weren't really very concerned about security.

To be on the safe side, I took the key to the alarm system with me. That meant that I would have to be sure to be the first one there on Monday morning. As it turned out, I was there much earlier than I expected.

So I asked myself, baking on the cafe terrace Sunday morning, what was the meaning of Jacobson's flare-up on Friday, where had he been Saturday, did he get the message to call Chapman, what was he looking for in his desk and files? But the big question that came to me suddenly was, why was he holding the gun in his right hand? Jacobson was a lefty.

I paid my check and, abandoning the *Post* at the cafe, walked briskly back to my house on Mass. Ave. near Eleventh Street NE. As I was unlocking the front door, I could

hear the phone ringing. I dashed to the nearest phone, in the kitchen, and picked it up to hear a click and a dial tone. I am probably the last person in North America who doesn't have an answering machine.

I went upstairs to the small bedroom in the back where I have an office set up, found Logan's card, and dialed the number. He answered in one ring.

"Logan," I said, "this is Ross Ward."

"Are you psychic or something? Where are you? I just called."

"Listen," I said, "I just thought of something that you might be interested in. Jacobson was left-handed, but he had the gun in his right hand."

"Yeah, we know. There are a lot of inconsistencies." He sounded disappointed. "I need to look over the crime scene again. Can you meet me there?"

"In about twenty minutes," I said.

Logan, in the same snug polyester suit, was waiting at the door of the ANGSTA offices when I arrived. I unlocked the door and went directly to the security alarm and turned it off. Logan strode past me while I fiddled with the alarm. He rounded the corner toward Ja-

cobson's office and shouted, "Hey, what's this?"

The door to Jacobson's office was standing open. The police seal had been broken.

Logan decided that whatever he wanted to see in Jacobson's office had suddenly become less urgent than having a little heart-to-heart talk with me. He grabbed me a bit too tightly by the shoulder and walked me down to my office. I sat on the sofa. He leaned on the edge of my desk.

"You were the last one here when forensics sealed that office. You have the key to the security system. So you must be the guy that broke into the office, right? Why?"

"Slow down, Logan," I said. "You're making a lot of assumptions."

"Yeah? Where were you when I called?"

"Having breakfast the same place I usually have breakfast on Sundays."

"And they'll remember you were there?"

"I think so. Yeah."

"That doesn't prove anything, does it?"

"No. I suppose I could have broken into a half dozen offices before breakfast. But I didn't."

"No? Let me tell you something about this case. It might be more serious than you think.

We're talking about murder now, not suicide."

"Right. And that's just what the information I gave you suggests. Why would I try to help if I had something to hide? For that matter why would I kill Jacobson anyway?"

"We can work that out later. Right now the problem you've got is, it doesn't look like anybody else *could* have killed Jacobson. According to the medical examiner, lividity and body temperature suggest that Jacobson had been dead at least two hours. You had the key to the security alarm. How did he get into the office and get killed two hours before the alarm went off if you weren't there to help him?"

"I don't know. Maybe he *did* shoot himself. Maybe he was hiding in the office when I left."

"Then who set off the alarm two hours later?"

"Who knows? Burglars. Somebody else from the office staff." Logan just stared at me, grinding his teeth. "I know. It doesn't sound very convincing to me either."

"There are more problems here than you think," Logan said. "Let me list them for you. Jacobson, a left-hander, was holding the gun in his right hand. A paraffin test showed that that hand hadn't fired a gun recently. Neither had his

other hand. He had been dead two hours or more. And finally, forensics didn't find a shell casing at the scene. That's what I wanted to come back here for, to see if they had missed it. But if I find it now, it won't mean much."

Nevertheless, we went to Jacobson's office to have a look, but not before Logan made me turn my pockets out to prove that I didn't have the shell casing on me. The place was a mess. Whoever had done this was not nearly so neat as the person who had searched the room before. Desk drawers had been yanked all the way out and emptied, files were strewn around the floor, books had been pulled from the bookshelves. The shell casing wasn't there.

Logan observed that there wasn't much point in sealing Jacobson's office now and, once again telling me to call him if anything came up, abruptly left, as seemed to be his custom.

Since it was almost noon, I decided to stop in at the Capitol Hilton to see if I could find Ted Chapman. It was easier than I expected. In the bar just off the hotel lobby, Buster, the bartender, was setting up for business. Chapman was his first customer.

I perched on the stool next to him and said, "If you wanted to

start this early, why didn't you hit the liquor cabinet in the suite? You could've stayed in your pajamas."

"Braxton came in last night. He called about ten thirty from National and told me to clear out."

That was not a first. Braxton never shared the suite with anyone, and since he was chairman, CEO, and eight-hundred-pound gorilla of AmGasCo, he could sleep wherever he wanted.

"Have the police talked to you yet?"

"Not before they woke up Braxton at four this morning."

I ordered a scotch and water.

"Did Jacobson ever get in touch with you?" I asked Chapman.

"Why should he?"

"You said you wanted to talk to him, so I left a message for him to call you."

"Well, maybe he didn't get the message."

"Did you know that somebody broke into the ANGSTA offices again?"

"What?" Chapman swiveled on his stool and looked at me. All at once he was taking a lively interest in the conversation.

"Yeah. Jacobson's office is a wreck."

"Anything missing?" He seemed suddenly very tense.

"How would I know?"

Chapman slid off his stool and said, "Get the tab, will you, Ross? I've got to see Braxton." And he headed off toward the elevator bank in the lobby.

"You know what, Buster?" I said sipping my drink.

"What's that, Ace?" Buster called everybody "Ace."

"Some places they actually put whisky in these things."

"Um-hm. We can do that, too. Cost you extra."

Monday morning, the suicide of John Jacobson was reported in the *Post* on page one of the Metro section. According to the story, Jacobson, forty-two, had been recently divorced and even more recently laid off. He was depressed. He left a note that said so. It was pretty much the same story that has appeared occasionally in newspapers all over the country. Apparently the police had revealed none of the messier details that suggested this story might not be so typical. Having no really good leads, the police were going to wait for the murderer to trip himself up.

They didn't have long to wait. Monday morning I came in early and began cleaning Jacobson's office. I had reassembled the files that were scat-

tered around the floor and put them back in the file cabinet, and I had reshelfed the books. All the while, I was keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, I had no idea what.

When nothing remarkable turned up, it occurred to me to have a look at Jacobson's computer. I don't know a lot about computers, but I do know how to turn one on. Jacobson had an IBM AT with six forty kilobytes RAM and a forty megabyte hard drive. Pretty puny by today's standards and not terribly advanced even then.

When the C: prompt came up, I entered DIR and found that Jacobson had some of the better software—Lotus 1-2-3, WordPerfect, CrossTalk. There was one document file called simply J. It was the suicide note. Apparently he had kept his document files on floppies.

I looked around to see if I could find some diskettes, but all I found were the program diskettes for the software on his hard drive. The association had paid for those, and Honest John hadn't taken them with him. But he, or somebody, had taken a mass mailing to members of Congress that I knew had gone out several months before I was hired by ANGSTA.

When an ANGSTA-supported bill had been introduced back in January, the associa-

tion had sent letters about the bill to key members of Congress. It was a sweeping piece of legislation called "The Natural Gas Reform and Energy Independence Act." More cynical observers called it "ANGSTA's Letter to Santa" because it included everything our member companies thought they might like. Its various sections fell under the jurisdiction of several different committees. All the members of those committees got letters, and all the more senior members got personal visits from Jacobson, Ted Chapman, and other government relations representatives of the association's member companies. The diskettes that had those letters on them were nowhere to be found.

While I was pondering what to do next, the phone rang. It was Congressman Peter McCormick. He had read the item about Jacobson in the *Post*, he said, and wanted to offer his condolences. After we talked a bit, I got the feeling that there was more on McCormick's mind than social niceties. He was asking questions about what Jacobson had been working on and why he was fired and whether one had anything to do with the other.

"Hold it, Mac," I said. "What's this all about?"

He played innocent, claimed he was just expressing interest in a friend, he and Jacobson used to play racquetball together, that's all. Saying he had another call, he hung up. I didn't buy it, any of it—not even the part about the incoming call, although that was probably true.

I had known Peter McCormick the whole time he had been in Congress. He was in his fourth term. He was not given to gossip and idle chitchat—for that very reason there was a breed of lobbyists, oldtimers mostly, who simply couldn't deal with him. Gossip and idle chitchat were their stock in trade, and he kept cutting through to the hard issues.

McCormick knew more than he had read in the paper, but what? Something that had made him suspicious of Jacobson's "suicide"? Something to do with legislation? Did anyone ever commit suicide over legislation? Did anyone ever kill anyone over legislation? Probably not. Murder and suicide are personal matters. Official business might be invoked as an excuse, but the real motivation is usually something closer to home. I made a mental note to pay a call on my old friend Peter McCormick.

I went back to my office at the other end of the hall and

tried to get some work done. It was no use. I kept thinking about Jacobson. One thing I should have thought a lot sooner, if I had been thinking at all, was how did Jacobson get into the building in the middle of the night? I decided to go have a talk with the security guard and check the sign-in book.

Just as I was leaving, Betty came in. Her eyes were red, and when she saw me, she burst into tears again. She had read the story in the *Post* and was distraught, blaming herself, blaming me, blaming ANGSTA, blaming Congress, for John's tragic suicide. I tried to comfort her and send her home for the day, but she insisted she would carry on. And carry on she did. Smiling through the tears. Stiff upper lip. John would want it that way.

Just what I needed. When Jacobson was alive, you couldn't allow the two of them in the same room without a referee. I finally settled Betty behind her desk, told her to let the rest of the staff—an errand boy and a part-time secretary—have the day off, and gave her some typing to do.

"I'll be back this afternoon," I said over my shoulder as I went out the front door.

Downstairs in the building lobby, the security guard was sitting behind his desk reading one of the more lurid tabloids. I had never noticed him, but he knew me immediately. Obviously he had an inquiring mind.

He hadn't been on duty when Jacobson was killed, but he had his own theories.

"Security in this place has more holes than all the cheese in Switzerland," he said. "If a guard's making rounds or goes to the john, any tenant with a key can walk right through the front door without signing in. Or if the tenant has one of those electronically coded cards to get into the parking garage, he can take the elevator to any floor in the building without passing the security desk. Now, Mr. Jacobson, he didn't sign in. It would be in the book. But Jerry—he's the boy who was working the desk this weekend—he tells me the cops hauled off Mr. Jacobson's car from the garage, so that must be how Mr. Jacobson got in."

"Did Jacobson have a card?"

"Must have. Else how did his car get in the garage?"

How indeed? So far as I knew, Jacobson usually came to work on the subway. There were subway stops near his home in Alexandria, near the office, and on Capitol Hill. It

was a lot cheaper and more convenient to take the subway than to hassle with parking. I had a card. ANGSTA paid for it as one of my perks. But I didn't think Jacobson did.

This whole business was getting out of hand. Everywhere I turned there was some new piece of electronic equipment that complicated matters. The security alarm that went off the first time but not the second time, the computer with the suicide note and without the mass mailing, the card to get into the garage. What did it all add up to?

I chewed on that while I rode the subway up to the Hill, but I couldn't make anything of it. As I was walking from the Metro stop to the Longworth House Office Building, I spotted Ted Chapman hailing a cab. I waved, but apparently he didn't see me.

Just as I got to the building, Peter McCormick came out the door. Before I could even say, "Hi!" he grabbed me by the elbow, turned me around, and said, "I have to get over to the floor for a vote. Walk with me."

"A vote? This early? On a Monday?"

"We're trying to get out for the August recess."

"You mean 'district work period,' don't you?"

"Right. Listen, Ross, you've always been straight with me. We haven't been on the same side many times, but I trust you."

"Thanks." He had my arm in a tight grip, and we walked in silence for awhile at a faster pace than my Sunday workouts with the *Washington Post* had prepared me for. McCormick, who was a couple of inches shorter than me and about the same age, was in great shape. He was an ex-Marine, and he looked it.

"Your buddy Chapman was just in my office. He chaps my butt. The guy is slicker than goose grease."

"What did he want?" I asked.

"He was pumping me about Jacobson. Indirectly, you know. Cagy."

I knew. It was the same thing McCormick had been doing to me in our phone conversation that morning. "That must have been some conversation," I said, "both of you being cagy." I had decided to take the direct approach. It fit better with McCormick's personality.

McCormick stopped suddenly and looked at me. We were standing at the base of the steps on the east front of the Capitol. "That obvious, huh? I thought I was being subtle."

"Like a bullfrog on a white linen tablecloth."

McCormick, still gripping my elbow, started up the steps instead of going inside and taking the elevator like an ordinary mortal. "Oh no," I said, planting my feet. "If I trot up there after you, I'm going to infarct. You can say your piece right here."

"Okay, here it is." He released my arm and reached into his inside jacket pocket. "I got a strange note from Jacobson a few months ago. When I tried to ask him about it, he put me off. Said he wanted to check some things out first, said there was plenty of time. Now he's dead. Read this, and get back to me." Handing me a letter, he turned and trotted up the steps.

The letter itself was unremarkable. It was one of the form letters that had gone out in the ANGSTA mailing back in January. But at the bottom was a note in Jacobson's handwriting. It said, "Mac—I have something you need to see before this comes to a vote in committee. Racquetball soon? J."

That wouldn't be so odd if McCormick were someone we could count on to support our legislation. A good lobbyist would provide his allies with ammunition for the committee debates. But Jacobson, McCormick, and I all knew where McCormick stood on this bill. He was against it. Did Jacob-

son have something that he thought would turn McCormick around? Or was Jacobson planning to scuttle his own bill?

Whoever rifled Jacobson's office could have been looking for whatever Jacobson was going to show McCormick. If they had found it, they would have stopped looking. If not... I went into the Capitol, found a pay phone, and called Logan. I got him, but he sounded like he was eating his lunch.

"Have you checked out Jacobson's house?"

"Why?"

"Because whoever turned over his office might have been there too."

"That's right."

"So?"

"If somebody's been there, he was a lot neater than the guy who trashed your office. One funny thing, though, somebody formatted the hard disk on Jacobson's personal computer. There weren't any floppies in the place either."

"Oh."

Twenty minutes later I was sitting at the bar of the Hawk and Dove in front of a Reuben sandwich and a draft beer. What was Jacobson going to show McCormick? If it was something to do with ANGSTA legislation, who would care? I

would. Any of the ANGSTA members might. McCormick might. Enough to kill Jacobson? Not a chance.

I was getting nowhere fast, so I paid my tab and took a taxi back to the office. Betty had done the typing I had given her, let the rest of the staff off, and left early. That was a relief. I had the place to myself, so I started looking around.

Apparently the only thing that had been missing from Jacobson's office and from his home had been some computer diskettes. So maybe that's what Jacobson's murderer had been looking for. Where was the best place to hide a computer diskette? With a bunch of other diskettes. It was the old "Purloined Letter" gimmick. But the murderer had solved the problem of finding the right one by taking all of Jacobson's diskettes. He could then examine them at his leisure to find the right one.

But what if the right one hadn't been with the ones in Jacobson's office? If it had been, Jacobson would have taken it with him when he left, wouldn't he? Realizing it was probably a futile task, but having nothing better to do, I started looking at the other diskettes in the office. Betty had a file box with a half-dozen diskettes on her desk. They

were all labeled, and as I checked them out on her computer, their contents all seemed to match the labels. There was a full, unopened box of diskettes in Betty's desk drawer. No point in checking them.

Then it hit me. There were three computers in the office, Betty's, mine, and Jacobson's. Betty had a year's supply of diskettes in her desk. My predecessor had never used his computer. Jacobson would have felt safe hiding a diskette among those in the supply closet. Only a week or so earlier, I had taken an open box of diskettes from the supply closet when I wanted to download some information from LegiSlate, the *Washington Post's* congressional data base. If one of those diskettes was Jacobson's, he couldn't have got it before he left.

I went back to my office and looked through the box of diskettes. One of them had an inconspicuous white dot on its black sleeve. I booted up my computer, put the diskette in the drive, and read out the directory. There was one file: BRAXTON.

I called up my word processing program and entered the command to retrieve BRAXTON, but all I got was the message "Enter password." I tried JACOBSON, JJACOBSON, JOHNJA-

COBSON, J, JJ, ANGSTA, AMGASCO, GAS, and several other obvious possibilities. The obvious wasn't working. I tried MCCORMICK. No dice. The password could be anything up to twenty-four characters.

I thought about the note that McCormick had given me and tried RACQUETBALL. Nothing. Then I tried RACQUETBALLSOON? and finally RACQUETBALLNOW-MCCORMICK, twenty-four characters, exactly. And there it was.

And it was ridiculous. Maybe Jacobson had lost his mind. It was a memo outlining a plan to blow up one of AmGasCo's compressor stations, a plan that Jacobson attributed to Braxton. He didn't have any convincing evidence. Apparently Jacobson had read the plot into something Braxton had said and he had convinced himself that it was for real. But why would McCormick be interested?

I decided to call him and ask. McCormick wasn't available, so I left a message for him to call me. In the meantime, I went over the records again for our office lease. It included three cards for the parking garage. I had one of them. I didn't know who had the other two, but since Braxton had been the founder and moving force behind the association, it was a

good bet that he had one of them. And if there was a second key to the security system, Braxton would have that, too.

Suppose Jacobson had got the message that Ted Chapman wanted to talk to him and, instead of calling, had gone to the hotel suite where Chapman was supposed to be staying. But Chapman's not there. Braxton is. Jacobson confronts Braxton with the crazy plot to blow up a compressor station. Maybe Jacobson gets physical. Considering the agitated state he was in, that's not impossible. So Braxton shoots him. Maybe it was Jacobson's gun, and he was shot in a scuffle. Now Braxton has a body on his hands. He can't just call housekeeping and have the hotel clean it up, so he hauls Jacobson over to the office, goes through the files, types the suicide note, and gets out before anyone responds to the alarm.

I didn't like it. Was Braxton a good typist? I never met an executive who was. He had thirty seconds, plus however long it took the security guard to respond—a minute, two?—to go through the files and compose and type a suicide note.

But if we assume he had a key to the alarm, he could do all that at his leisure:

The phone rang. It was McCormick. I told him about

Jacobson's memo, and he didn't seem to think it was quite as ridiculous as I did. There was an AmGasCo compressor station in Arkansas, he said, that received gas from producers in Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana and delivered it through the company's main lines to the Midwest and the Northeast. If that station was down, gas deliveries to a quarter of the country would be cut in half.

"So? Why would Braxton want that?" I asked.

"It's all in the timing. You wait until the first big cold snap—late November, early December—and you'll have a crisis on your hands. Schools closed. People out of work. Old ladies frozen to death in their homes. And when there's a crisis, what does Congress do?"

"Congress acts."

"Yeah. But Congress doesn't always act smart, especially when we're trying to adjourn for the year. We'll look around and see there's this bill that has already hopped through a lot of committee hoops. And the name sounds good—'The Natural Gas Reform and Energy Independence Act.' We'll jump up, pass it without worrying too much about the details, and go home to tell our constituents what good boys and girls we are."

"So with an atmosphere of crisis and internal pressure to adjourn, Congress gives AmGasCo what it wants—at the cost of one compressor station."

"That cost is paid in the bill. There's a provision for an investment tax credit for new equipment—which, incidentally, would be a good argument for the bill, since this 'accident' will have happened because of old equipment."

"You'd have to be paranoid to spot a scheme like that."

"I used to be a prosecutor. It comes with the territory. In fact, everybody hates me because I'm paranoid."

"Come on, Mac. It couldn't work. Too many things would go wrong. No telling what the bill would look like when you finally voted on it."

"Look, Ross, the bill includes every passing whim that any gas executive ever had. So what if they lose some of it, or even most of it? If you ask me, the only parts of the bill that really mean anything are the tax and trade measures."

"Right now," he explained, "oil prices are so low that number six fuel oil can compete head to head with natural gas as an industrial fuel. If Congress piles a bunch of tariffs and quotas on imported energy sources, we can wrap ourselves in the Stars and Stripes and

proclaim energy independence, when the main thing we've done is to allow AmGasCo to put a hammerlock on the energy market in the Midwest and Northeast. No more competition from oil—not to mention imported coal and Canadian gas."

"Geez. You might be right. But it still sounds crazy."

"Okay. It sounds crazy to me, too, but how does it sound to Braxton?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll ask him."

Strolling over to the Hilton to accuse Braxton of plotting to blow up one of his compressor stations wasn't the smartest thing I had ever done. So far as I knew, the last person to do that wound up dead. But at least I had enough sense to call Logan before I went. Naturally, he wasn't in, so I left a message for him to meet me at the Am-GasCo hotel suite.

Obviously, when I had the cops on the phone, I could have blown the whistle on Braxton and let them handle it while I went out for a stiff drink. But I didn't want to try to explain the whole business to anybody. Hell, I didn't believe half of it myself.

So there I was, alone, standing at the door of the suite, trying to think what to say. "Ex-

cuse me, Mr. Braxton, but I believe you shot John Jacobson because he thought you were going to blow up a compressor station"? That should get a good laugh.

I knocked at the door. A muffled voice answered, "Who's there?"

"Ross Ward."

And Ted Chapman opened the door. He was wearing his best twelve hundred dollar suit and looked recently barbered and manicured.

"Where's Mr. Braxton? I thought you were going back to Houston today."

"I was. Lloyd asked me to stay over. We're having dinner with the Secretary of Energy."

"I need to see him."

"The Energy Secretary?"

"Braxton."

"He's getting dressed. We're running late."

Braxton appeared from one of the bedrooms. He was fumbling with a button on his starched shirtfront. "Damn," he said, as the button crumbled in his fingers. "I'm going to have the whole laundry staff in this hotel fired."

"I think they send the laundry out," I said, stepping into the suite but leaving the door ajar. "Besides, you ought to be more cautious about having people fired."

He looked at me, and you could see his blood pressure rise. "It was just business," he said. "How did I know the little creep would kill himself?"

"He didn't," I said. We all froze. There was dead silence for about three seconds.

"What the hell is he talking about?" Braxton shouted at Chapman.

Chapman turned to me, poker-faced. "What are you talking about, Ross?"

"I think Mr. Braxton knows more about the death of John Jacobson than he's telling."

"Crap!" Braxton said. "The guy shot himself."

"Yeah? Before or after he went through the files, set off the alarm, disposed of the shell casing, and lay down on the carpet with his gun in the wrong hand?"

"So you can't make it add up, and you think I have something to do with your arithmetic problem? Why is that?" Braxton asked. He was calmer, but Chapman was starting to look uneasy.

"Jacobson left behind a memo describing in some detail how you might go about blowing up a compressor station."

"I might have said something like that to him—as a joke. But look, what we have here is an old, old story. I fire a man. He's angry. He's depressed. He

wants to blow his brains out. But he also wants to get even with me. So he leaves an incriminating note. No proof, I assume?"

"No. No proof." I looked at Chapman. He had moved around behind me and was sitting on the edge of a desk in the corner of the room.

I turned back to Braxton. "You know, in a way, the murder of Jacobson *is* proof. If what he said wasn't true, he could talk until he was blue in the face, and it wouldn't matter very much. But if you really planned to blow up a compressor station, all he had to do to stop you was to spread the story around."

"Yes. But why would I want to do that?"

"It's a long story, but I think I can explain . . ."

"I wish you'd explain it to me some time." Braxton and I both jumped in surprise. It was Logan, standing in the partially opened doorway to the hall with his service revolver drawn. He flung back the door and wheeled away from me and Braxton.

"Mr. Chapman, step away from that desk, please. Keep your hands in sight."

And he Mirandized Chapman.

Well, I was almost right. It's

not as though Braxton was pure as the driven snow. And Logan had an advantage. He knew the forensic results—carpet fibers from the hotel on Jacobson's jacket, a partial fingerprint—Chapman's—in Jacobson's car, and an inconspicuous bloodstain—Jacobson's type—on the cuff of a shirt Chapman had sent out to be laundered Monday morning.

When I thought about it, it all added up—at last. Jacobson had got the message that Chapman wanted to talk to him. He had gone to the hotel suite, and Chapman had killed him.

When Chapman had been at my office on Friday, he had gone into Jacobson's office, too—Betty mentioned that he had left a note for Jacobson. That was when he had gone through Jacobson's files, taken all of his diskettes, and left the suicide note on Jacobson's computer.

He probably hadn't meant to kill Jacobson at the hotel suite. If he had killed Jacobson anywhere—at home or in Rock Creek Park, say—the note would have turned up and confirmed the apparent suicide. But killing him at the hotel suite complicated things—especially when Braxton called from National and told Chapman to clear out of the suite.

There he was with an inconvenient stiff and the boss only thirty minutes away. He dumped the body in a laundry hamper, took it to the basement in the service elevator, and parked it there while he went back upstairs to clean up the suite and welcome Braxton.

After he got Braxton settled in, he still had to find a more likely spot to dispose of the body. Taking it to the office was just dumb, but he was in a panic, and besides he knew the office and knew that we always left the key in the alarm. He didn't expect anyone to find Jacobson until Monday morning. And, yes, he had the third card to get into the basement garage of our office building.

The second card was in the desk drawer in the hotel suite, along with a second key to the security system. When the cops woke up Braxton at four in the morning, he stewed for a while and then took the garage card and the security alarm key and went to rifle Jacobson's office.

It was Chapman's plan to blow up the compressor station, but being the super lobbyist that he was, Chapman had sold Braxton on the plan and probably even convinced him that it was his idea. Braxton had spilled the beans to Jacobson because he wanted to show how smart he was and because like

most people—like you—he assumed that, as a lobbyist, Jacobson had no moral standards. When he saw Jacobson's reaction, he decided to fire him, not thinking ahead to what that would do to the plot.

Really, Chapman was too good—"slicker than goose grease," as McCormick said. It had all come easily to him. He knew that the plot to blow up a compressor station was a long shot, but he figured he couldn't lose. If it worked, he would have another, and more spectacular, legislative triumph and if it didn't, he could at least turn the explosion to his advantage in the internal politics of the company. Nobody except him and Braxton would ever know that the explosion had not been an accident, but Chapman could easily persuade the AmGasCo board of directors that the accident was a result

of Braxton's failed leadership. Then maybe he could boost Braxton out and step into the top job himself. He had unlimited confidence in his persuasive powers. He believed he could sell refrigerators to Eskimos, or—more aptly, in this case—gas to Congress. In his career, victory had followed upon triumph. All he had ever known was success.

Chapman was an example of what William James calls somewhere "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS."

And me? The pursuit of the same goddess had brought me to ANGSTA in the first place. And my unquestioning dismissal of Jacobson—even though I knew that effective staff was more important than flashy office space—that was moral flabbiness.

End of sermon. Amen.

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FICTION

AUNT RUTABAGA

by Arthur Porges



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Even if his Aunt Melba had been bright, warm, witty, charming, and beautiful, Mark Hamilton Whipple would still have sacrificed her for his own benefit without a qualm. That she was, in fact, air-headed, selfish, cold, and so plain that as one detractor—she had many behind her back where the money wasn't obtrusive—said, she looked as if she'd fallen out of the Ugly Tree and hit every damned branch on the way down, was not a factor in his decision to insure his own financial security.

He was himself, and he knew it, no Errol Flynn for looks, although he never said so aloud, and as cold as a frozen snake. No, what made his operation Counter Aunt a vital necessity, and soon, was her blasted lifestyle. She drank heavily, everything from cheap beer to Jack Daniel's and French champagne; smoked several packs of cigarettes daily; and ate enough junk food, full of saturated fat and chemicals barely known to science, to give indigestion to a dozen burly truckers. At age fifty-two, she already had severe emphysema and a congestive heart for which she took, when she remembered, not always the case, a variety of medications. She was often in and out of the hos-

pital, and Mark was sure she would die there sooner rather than later, probably in a matter of months. Her death in itself did not concern him; there was no love lost between them; but while she was alive he got a hundred thousand dollars annually from her late husband's considerable estate. On her death that income ceased, and all the money went to various charities, there being no other heirs.

In short, it was up to him to keep her alive, yet there was no chance she'd reform and become a nonsmoking, ever-sober vegetarian. That hundred thousand was absolutely essential to his survival as a happy, untroubled, relaxed playboy, the only role he was fit for, having no marketable skills and no work experience whatever, since his late uncle Alexander P. Whipple had reluctantly, aware of the boy's numerous deficiencies, put him on the Gravy Train for the life of Melba.

There was only one solution, far from perfect, much of a gamble, and not easy to implement, but at worst at least equal to his present situation, and at best, one that would guarantee his income for years to come.

He began by investigating her insurance policy and was

reassured on that score. The shrewd A. P. Whipple had bought a really ironclad document, one that would pay for any amount of hospitalization for any length of time, for any ailment or ailments, for all doctor's bills, for everything down to the last five dollar tissue and seven fifty aspirin tablet.

Mark had visited his aunt several times in the hospital, not out of compassion it should be emphasized. Rather, as a born opportunist and exploiter, he always tried to stay in her good graces in case something happened to his annuity and he had to call on her for help, unlikely as such assistance might be what with her greed and selfishness.

But a useful bonus from such visits was his familiarity with hospital routine, now so vital to his plan. While Melba and he had engaged in small talk, her suspicious gaze often on his bland face, Mark, with his basically good mind and powers of observation, noted and retained many details about patient care, from the respirator that attached to Melba's nose and mouth and was in turn connected to a mysterious electronic cabinet that beeped a warning and alerted the nurses if anything went wrong, to the timing of pulse and temperature readings. For example,

when Melba dug messily into the box of chocolates he'd brought, she loosened the mask unintentionally so that the monitor went into a loud trill of alarm and a nurse hurried in to check. At the time he was merely amused, if wryly, but now the information was critical to his success.

The plan was basically simple in concept: Aunt Melba must be made into a vegetable, kept alive by machines for—how long? Well, Mark had read about such patients lasting for years, with nobody allowed to disconnect them legally as long as the closest relatives objected. And as her only close relation, he would evince great horror at the idea of cutting off the life-support equipment. The insurance company would hate him, but there would be nothing they could do, thanks to the airtight policy A. P. Whipple had paid so much for in 1980 dollars. Come to think of it, Mark reflected, maybe he could sound them out, very obliquely, about paying him, say, a hundred and fifty thousand a year for life if he gave permission—why settle for his present income if he could do better? But that would keep. For now, it was the operative details that mattered.

The brute-force obvious idea would be to pull the mask from

her face for six to eight minutes, by which time the brain would die, so to speak, for lack of oxygen. But that option had an obvious, fatal flaw: the box would beep, a nurse come running, and the airflow be restarted in moments. Besides, she'd cry out, fight him, make a fuss; no good; impracticable. There was a better way he'd found out about. If one could inject a hefty dose of some potassium compound into the blood, the heart would stop almost instantly, like a switched-off light bulb. No need to puncture her, which wouldn't be possible surreptitiously anyhow; just inject some potassium chloride, easily obtainable either as a salt substitute or a health supplement, into the IV bag hanging by Melba's bed. He could do it quickly, casually, with his back to her, blocking any view of the act. Then, the moment her heart stopped and she fell back against the pillow, he'd snatch the mask—this was his lovely solution; he was proud of such ingenuity—and breathe into it himself, so aborting the warning system. He needed only six to eight minutes, and would watch through the door's glass panel for any unwelcome visitors. At worst, if anybody did come in, he could immediately restore the mask and let the

beeping start. The nurses would charge in and restart Melba's heart—if they could. If not, and she died, he'd lose his gamble, but nothing could be proved against him. Even if there was an autopsy and the potassium contamination was found in the IV bag, it would be thought some error in the preparation of the solution. On the other hand, if his aunt survived he could try again later.

Actually, it went without a hitch. Within seconds of his injecting the solution, his aunt gasped, her eyes rolled up and went glassy-blank, and she fell back. He grabbed the mask, put it on, and took several deep breaths. There was no alarm, and since nobody approached the room, he was able to allow almost nine minutes, more than enough for irreversible brain death. His Aunt Melba, the feisty, unlovable woman so fat in her tacky yellow robe, was now the Giant Rutabaga, the vegetable that insured his income. Nobody seemed suspicious; rather they shared his obvious grief over so unfortunate a development. He even managed a bit of moisture in his eyes.

When after five months there were no glitches, no nasty consequences, Mark began to relax, feeling himself home free and quite pleased with the

world he had so neatly manipulated.

He did get a brief scare when some eager beaver of a doctor wanted to try some kind of new medication, an injection, that showed some promise in bringing flat electro-encephalographs back to life, reviving dead brains, as the researcher put it.

Although taken by surprise, Mark was quick to protect himself. With a great show of pious anger, he refused the offer, objecting that Melba was no guinea pig for dangerous experiments. "For all I know," he fumed to the doctor, "your crazy stuff could kill my dear aunt. No way, doctor; I'll never allow it." It could have been hairy: what if she actually woke up? To be sure, she'd probably had no idea what he'd done to her, and the IV bag was long gone, but he'd be back at Square One, with her drinking, smoking, over-eating, and again likely to die soon.

Safe for now, he was still uneasy, so he sounded out the insurance company as he'd thought of earlier. They were intrigued but didn't bite. Rather than pay him a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year for life, which might be fifty or more years in his case, they preferred to gamble that Melba would die naturally or

somehow be disconnected from the life-support machinery.

Three events, not obviously related, but perhaps part of the complex tapestry woven by the Three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, changed everything.

First, Mike Hallinan, the agent from the senior Whipple's insurer, Moran, Adler and Musgrave, came by one evening to offer Mark a company annuity of fifty thousand a year for ten years if he'd give permission to unplug his Aunt Melba. Mark was tempted, but not much. There was every indication from hospital personnel he'd sought out and carefully cultivated with free drinks that the patient was physically stable and might well hang on indefinitely, and a hundred thousand a year was indubitably better than fifty. No question about that, so the risk was worth it. As it turned out, that was a bad decision.

The second event, much more public, involved the work of a sharp investigative reporter who, having got wind of the Melba Whipple case, carefully researched it, learning that by keeping her alive, although citing compassion and unwillingness to "lose" his beloved aunt, her nephew, an idler, a womanizer, and a quintessential ne'er-do-well, gained a fat income by

most standards and might enjoy it for years. The report in the local paper was headlined CONCERN OR GREED?, and few readers had any doubt about the answer.

And finally, the third and definitive event: after a loud and bitter quarrel about the morality of maintaining the hapless Melba in a coma with his current girlfriend, a six foot tall, titian-haired showgirl, Mark brutally cast her off for his latest bedmate, a petite brunette. He had been far too cautious to tell the redhead about the syringe of potassium chloride, but she had suspicions about just how Melba ended up a vegetable.

The very next day a tall, flame-haired, beautiful virago screaming, "I'll fix that parasite SOB!" charged into Melba's room brandishing a tire iron, wreaking havoc on all the life-support equipment, battering the delicate complex into rubbish. It took several husky guards to restrain her, and by then Melba's heart had stopped for good.

The tragicomic end of L'Af-faire Whipple, as one observer called it, came just a few months later, when Mark, broke, despondent, and more than a bit tipsy from cheap red wine, stumbled into the path of a fast-moving minivan. It flung him forward and up in a classic parabola that would have intrigued a physicist. He just missed, unfortunately for him, a relatively soft lawn, to land instead in a rock garden belonging to a small, pricy restaurant, which—another irony in a case full of them—was featuring Pêche Melba.

When the paramedics came, some eighteen minutes later, they were able to stabilize his fibrillating heart, but at the hospital Mark's brain gave a dead flat reading on the screen. It stayed that way for three days, after which the state, finding no heirs and concerned about mounting costs at a tax-supported facility, had him disconnected.

And so, wielding her golden shears, the cold, classic serenity of her lovely face undisturbed, Atropos deftly cut Mark's thread.



For Sale Cheap; No Returns

by Dan Crawford

Ed had heard about these places, tucked down into the grub-bier sections of town, but he'd never actually been to one. He studied the sign on the tiny shop squeezed in between the cut-rate liquor store and the martial arts studio:

HOUSE OF SECRETS

Shrugging, he reached down to the tarnished doorknob and pulled it open. A whitehaired man stood in front of the counter,

studying a small box that seemed to contain no more than rolls of paper. Ed stepped inside. The bored woman behind the counter took her elbows off it. "Help you, sir?" she inquired. The accent was a little Spanish; it was that part of town.

Before answering, Ed checked the shelves behind her. They were empty.

"What is it, exactly, that you sell here?" he inquired.

"Secrets, sir," she replied with a nod. "One to a customer."

"Secrets?"

"Yes, sir." She raised a hand to the empty shelves, and a box marked EDWARD KANDELMACHER appeared on an empty shelf. "We'll sell you things you should know and things you shouldn't know. But we guarantee to sell you something you don't know."

Ed nodded; it was exactly what he had expected. Anyone who had spent his formative years watching *The Twilight Zone* knew how this worked. You found this mysterious little shop, bought of its mysterious little wares, and got yourself in dutch.

The proprietress, seeing that Ed had to think things over, moved back to her other customer. "Have you decided, sir?"

The man nodded and, without a word, took a little scroll from the box. He moved slowly toward the door, his feet barely rising from the floor. Halfway to the exit, he paused to unroll his secret.

Ed watched his face squinch into a grimace. The old man let the paper drop and moved on, his feet sliding even slower than before. He sighed as he opened the door and again as it dropped shut behind him.

A glance at the proprietress showed Ed she was looking at her nails, not at him. He stooped to snatch up the discarded secret and read it.

"Both your sons have always wanted to grow up to be just like you."

Ed frowned. How much of a secret could that be? He turned around and set his own elbows on the counter.

"How much does a secret cost?" he inquired.

She shrugged. "Much for much of a secret, a little for only a little secret. But only one to a customer, sir, so choose wisely."

He would indeed. "What can I get for that?" he said, slapping a penny on the counter.

One nostril jerked a little, but a hand came down to cover the penny and draw it back. "See for yourself, sir."

She turned and brought down the box. Ed studied the array of rolled slips of paper. "All these for one penny?"

"Just one, sir."

The ones in the middle were too obvious. He took out a scroll that was tucked away into the corner farthest from him. Unrolling it, he read out his one penny secret.

"Your wife's tattoo was originally quite different."

Ed frowned. He figured that tattoo, a big red rose just two inches below the navel, was a secret to just about everyone. But he knew about it.

"Originally quite different," huh? He'd heard about tattooing new pictures over embarrassing old ones: hearts with names in them, for example. Or a monogram, a couple of initials. Like P. B.: she was always talking about her college sweetheart, Peter Brummell.

Into his mind came the picture of that missing page. She said her yearbook got damaged in a scuffle with her roommate, Betty. But at Ed's college, a page had been torn out of every yearbook by order of the president, a little matter of a picture from behind a pep club pyramid that showed six cheerleaders but only five pairs of pants. Her yearbook could have a similarly indiscreet candid removed: a couple of streakers, say, one with a tattooed "P. B." just above the danger zone.

He turned toward the door. It wasn't really the initials that bothered him; the fact that she'd covered it over proved the whole affair was done. But there was the secrecy: she should have told him. She *ought* to have told him. Hadn't he told her about that business with Jerry and Jenny and the kumquat?

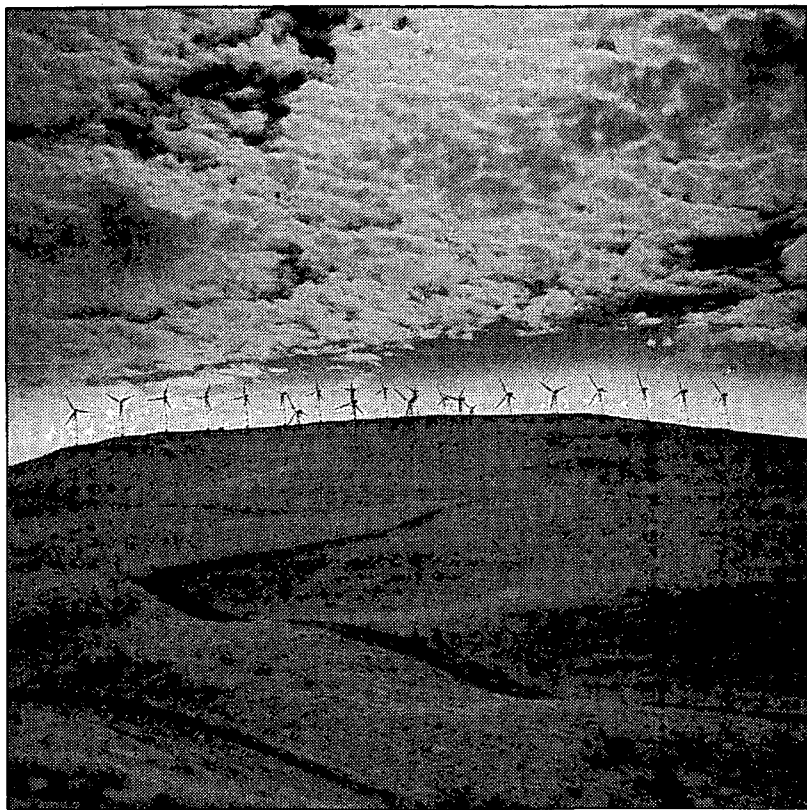
With one hand on the doorknob, he turned back.

"Hey!" he called to the woman behind the counter. "Was that one of the things I *should* know? Or one of the things I *shouldn't* know?"

She showed quantities of teeth in a smile. "Sorry, sir. That's a secret."

Ed took a step toward her, but she faded before his eyes. He was looking down an alley squeezed between a cut-rate liquor store and a martial arts studio. As he moved up the sidewalk, he started to let the little slip of paper fall from his hand. Then he caught it and thrust it into his pocket.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

They'll never be Rockettes. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "July Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION



THE BIRTHDAY MURDER

by C. M. Chan

Illustration by Mark Penta

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It was a hot summer night in London, but Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons of New Scotland Yard was cool in Phillip Bethancourt's air-conditioned flat. He stood before the hallway mirror and settled his jacket more comfortably across his shoulders, somehow dissatisfied with his appearance. Reflected back at him was a young man of medium height, a little stocky in build, with reddish-brown hair cropped short and fierce blue eyes. He wore a pair of cotton twill trousers, a tan jacket in a linen-cotton blend, and a white shirt patterned with small beige diamond shapes. He looked exactly like what he was—a young, off-duty policeman—but he managed to convince himself otherwise.

All this was in preparation for a blind date. The idea of matching Gibbons up with someone had come from Bethancourt's girlfriend, Marla Tate. Bethancourt was an enthusiastic amateur detective who persistently dogged Gibbons' steps whenever he was on a case. Marla loathed her boyfriend's hobby and had recently adopted the idea that if Gibbons could be interested in something besides his work she might be privy to fewer conversations about violent death. Marla was one of England's top

fashion models and, as such, had access to whole bevvies of lovely girls. It could, reflected Gibbons, be years before he met them all.

Tonight he was escorting Carolyn James to one of the exclusive West End nightclubs of which Bethancourt was a member. He had not met the young lady yet, but Bethancourt had pointed out her picture in the current issue of the *Tatler*. She was stunning.

Behind him in the mirror, his friend Bethancourt hove into view and immediately Gibbons felt dowdier. He had done his best with his limited wardrobe, which was chosen more with a view to inspiring confidence in the public than with cutting a dashing figure in fashionable nightclubs, and it showed next to Bethancourt's designer clothes. He knew perfectly well that Bethancourt had far more money to spend on clothing than he did, and that even had he possessed Bethancourt's wealth, he had not his friend's flair for style. And there was no denying that clothes hung better on Bethancourt's taller, leaner frame in any case.

Bethancourt was polishing his glasses on a corner of his jacket. Now he replaced them on his nose, pushed a lock of fair hair off his forehead, and

grinned at his friend in the mirror.

"All set? We should leave soon so as to allow time to find a taxi—it is Saturday night, after all. No, Cerberus," he added to the large Borzoi hound who had come up and was looking hopefully at him. "You're not coming. You stay."

"I'm ready," said Gibbons, turning resolutely from the mirror.

It was at that moment that the phone rang.

Neither man saw anything sinister about it at the time. Bethancourt cheerfully went to answer it while Gibbons collected the two whisky glasses they had been drinking from. He was turning toward the kitchen when he saw Bethancourt waving at him and saying into the receiver, "Oh, I see. You're looking for Sergeant Gibbons?" Here he raised his eyebrows questioningly at Gibbons. "Yes, well—oh, damn! Hold on a moment—I've dropped a cigarette . . ."

For one glorious moment Gibbons thought of shaking his head, letting Bethancourt deny all knowledge of his whereabouts, and going off to enjoy himself in the company of two beautiful women. But he knew he wouldn't do it. He sighed, nodded his head, and set the glasses down on one of the

many coffee tables that decorated Bethancourt's living room.

"Oh, here he is," said Bethancourt. "Jack, the phone's for you."

He relinquished the instrument and picked up the glasses himself. Bethancourt liked nothing better than following his friend through an investigation, but even so he wished a case had not come up tonight. He had gone to rather a lot of trouble to set it up.

He returned from the kitchen and lit a cigarette while Gibbons wound up his conversation. Gibbons rang off and turned to his friend.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've got to go."

"Is it a murder?" asked Bethancourt.

Gibbons nodded. "At a party in Mayfair," he answered and suddenly smiled. "Do you want to come? The superintendent said it'd be all right. It's a man," he added, "found stabbed to death in his study."

"Of course I want to come," replied Bethancourt, his hazel eyes eager behind his glasses. "Just let me ring Marla."

He reached for the phone and in a moment was saying brightly, "Marla? Yes, I know, but Jack's running late at the office. I was going to suggest that you two go on and we'll meet you there. I'm off this

minute to pry Jack away from his work. We'll meet in the bar. Well, all right, then, in the alcove room. If you're not there, we'll look on the dance floor. Right, then. See you soon."

Gibbons raised an eyebrow. "Was that wise?" he asked. "You know it'll be at least two or three hours, probably more."

"And you know how Marla hates a murder investigation," replied Bethancourt. "She'll take the news much better once she's at the club and having a good time. I'll ring her there later."

The flat in Mayfair was located in a small block of modern apartments. The door was opened by a uniformed constable, and the two young men found themselves in a wide hallway that ran the length of the flat. It was well appointed: a Persian runner was spread down its center, to their left was a Victorian hall stand, and beneath two of the charming wall sconces were polished tables holding artistic flower arrangements in antique Chinese bowls. The wallpaper was a warm cream and the moldings were picked out in gleaming white. Altogether the impression was of a solid but not immense amount of money, backed by modest good taste.

To their left was an archway opening on the living room; an

identical archway to the right led to the dining room. There was another door farther along on the left, and two more on the right, and the hallway ended in a third. This last was ajar; all the others were firmly closed.

The flat was not, however, air-conditioned. It was as hot inside as it was out; the constable was sweating heavily in his uniform, his red face flushed and damp. He eyed Bethancourt curiously and informed Gibbons that Superintendent Carmichael had not yet arrived.

"The photographer's here, though, sir. And the scene-of-the-crime men are waiting in the dining room."

"Where's the body?" asked Gibbons.

"In the study, sir." The constable pointed to the closed door just past the living room. "Davis is with all the guests in the living room. I have a list here, sir, of all their names."

Gibbons took the list and scanned it while he asked, "Who was the deceased?"

"James Wilkinson, sir. An elderly, retired gentleman. This is his flat."

"Does he have a wife?"

"He's a widower, sir. Clare Gooden is his daughter—she's the one who planned this party. It was the old man's birthday tomorrow."

Gibbons shook his head. "That's sad," he said. "They say how old he was going to be?"

"Seventy-three, sir."

"Pity," said Gibbons, "pity they couldn't let him have his last years. Well, we'd best have a look at him. Thanks very much, constable."

Bethancourt followed him as he strode down the hall. As they passed the open living room archway, he got a glimpse of a sad little tableau: a small knot of people sitting silent and unhappy under the watchful eye of a second policeman.

The study was a comfortable room. Immediately to their left as they entered was another door leading to the living room; to their right was an easy chair and a table piled with gaily-wrapped gifts. It made a sorry contrast to what awaited them at the opposite end of the room. Here there was a fine mahogany desk facing the hall door and, behind it, in a padded swivel chair, slumped the body of an elderly man. His head was thrown back, and from beneath his jaw protruded the ornate haft of a jewelled dagger. Blood had run down from the wound, soaking the silk tie and the shirtfront, but it did not appear to have splattered much. The chair was pushed back from the desk, and there were only one

or two drops of blood on the papers laid out there.

They had to stand well back while the police photographer snapped off several exposures, but when he began shifting his apparatus to a different angle, Gibbons edged forward. He pressed his fingers against one of the dead man's dangling hands and then against his forehead. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at his watch.

"Still a bit warm," he reported.

Bethancourt received this information with a nod. He had turned his back and was examining the bookcases at the far end of the room. Although he had helped Gibbons investigate several cases, he had never really developed a stomach for corpses.

"I'm ready for the next shot, sergeant," said the photographer.

"Oh yes, of course," replied Gibbons, who had been peering at the papers on the desk and eyeing a half-empty brandy glass. He moved hastily away from the desk, and the shutter began clicking busily.

The door opened, and Detective Superintendent Wallace Carmichael entered. He was a tall man, becoming a little portly with the years, with blue eyes and very bushy white eyebrows. In one hand he carried

an unlit cigar. Usually a genial man, it was clear from the moment he entered that he was in a bad temper over having his Saturday night interrupted—probably on the point of getting ready for bed. He raised a formidable eyebrow at Bethancourt by way of greeting, joined Gibbons hovering over the photographer, and said, "What have you got so far? And where's the bloody doctor?"

He ran his eye over the list of guests Gibbons handed him, glared at the body while Gibbons described his findings and then said, "Rather an ornate murder weapon, isn't it? What the hell is it?"

Gibbons was about to reply stolidly that it looked like a dagger to him when Bethancourt murmured, "I think it's sixteenth century—probably a replica. He's got some books on the period, and over on the shelf there are a couple of snuff-boxes. They look like copies, too, but very nice ones."

"Then it's probably his and not the murderer's," said Carmichael. He stared gloomily at the jeweled haft. "That's not going to show any fingerprints," he muttered. Then his gaze shifted. "What's that?"

He pointed to a scrap of silver and green paper on the floor near the desk.

"Wrapping paper, I think, sir," said Gibbons. "There's more of it in the wastebasket there."

"Well, let's have a look. Good Lord, man," he addressed himself to the photographer, "aren't you finished yet? We want to get the scene-of-the-crime men in, not dither about on a hot night."

Eventually the scene-of-the-crime men were gotten in, the doctor arrived with the ambulance, the dagger was removed and dusted for fingerprints, as was the rest of the room, and the brandy was taken away to be analyzed. The waste paper basket yielded up an old grocery list, an empty box of pen cartridges, a long, flat box, and enough silver and green wrapping paper to cover it. On the desk was a diary with the evening's party marked down on it and very little else. The blood-splattered papers turned out to be an account from a leading firm of investors; James Wilkinson had been doing well financially.

They investigated the rest of the flat, finding a bathroom at the end of the corridor, two bedrooms—one in use and one a guest room—and the kitchen opening off the dining room. Carmichael, discovering that the dining room archway possessed sliding doors, settled on

that for an interview room and sent a constable to inquire of the victim's daughter, if she would mind if the police put on a pot of coffee.

Thus having got the situation under control, the superintendent visited the living room where he was accosted with questions from the guests. A tall, dignified man with silvery hair demanded to know what was being done. Clare Gooden, the daughter, seemed to look on him as a god who would miraculously make everything all right. Her brother introduced himself authoritatively as the son and heir and then stammered off into silence, unsure as to what status, if any, this gave him. Another man approached to ask if he might take his lady home. Carmichael stemmed the tide with practiced ease, offered his condolences, and announced that he would have to interview each of them individually before anyone could be permitted to leave. Before they could protest, he explained that a post-mortem would be necessary and that the constable would just close the living room doors while the body was taken out.

He then retired to the dining room and settled himself at the table with Gibbons on his right and Bethancourt discreetly seated behind them, in a chair

by the kitchen door. He had found a telephone in the master bedroom and had rung Marla at the club, explaining to her that he and Jack had been held up. She had hung up on him, after telling him he was a cad.

Carmichael sipped the mug of coffee a constable had brought in and said, "Let's get on with it then." The murder weapon lay in a plastic evidence bag on the table before him along with the list of the guests and a large glass ash-tray in which he had placed his still unlit cigar. Gibbons had produced a notebook and two pencils and was stirring sugar into his coffee with the end of a pen. It was nearly midnight.

Carmichael sighed and glanced irritably at the two windows, sashes opened wide, that nevertheless refused to offer the slightest breath of a breeze. The superintendent's eye lighted on a floor fan in the corner.

"Let's have that thing on, for God's sake," he said, pointing. Gibbons started to rise, but Bethancourt, who was nearer, reached it first and flicked the switch. The blades whirled into life, blowing the stifling air about. It was some relief.

Carmichael frowned at the list of guests. "What a group," he growled. "Who's this con-tesa? This doesn't seem the

sort of place for the Italian nobility."

"Contessa di Caravaggio," supplied Bethancourt. "She's a well-known art collector, very wealthy. Sort of a patroness of the arts."

Carmichael swiveled around to look at him. "Do you know her?" he asked.

"No, sir." Bethancourt shook his head. "I recognized her from a magazine article."

Carmichael grunted and turned back to his list. "We'd best have Mrs. Gooden in first," he said. "She's terribly upset, but it was her party, and she can tell us something about the guests. Better offer her some coffee."

Gibbons went out and returned with Clare Gooden himself, closing the heavy doors behind them. She had been weeping profusely and still clutched a sodden handkerchief in one hand. Normally she was a nicely got-up woman of about thirty-five, but now her face was blotchy, her makeup had virtually disappeared, and her pale blue summer dress was crumpled and spotted. She was still sniffing, but she appeared anxious to help in any way she could.

"Now, Mrs. Gooden," said Carmichael, trying to erase any irritation from his tone, "first, we'd just like you to tell

us something about the guests. How well they knew your father, that sort of thing. You can do that, can't you?"

She shook her head, bewildered. "They're all like family," she said. "I can't believe any of them would harm him. It's . . . it's just incredible. I've known them all since I was a little girl."

"We'll look into every possibility," Carmichael assured her. "In the meantime, however, it would help us to know their relation to your father."

"Yes, of course." She made a visible effort to pull herself together. "There's my husband Grant and my brother Laurence. That's all the family here—Laurence's wife is abroad on vacation with the children. Then there's the Postons—John and Katharine—who live downstairs. John Poston worked for the same bank as my father when they first came down from university, and they've been friends ever since. Laura is their youngest child. We all lived next door to each other when we were growing up. Mr. Poston was transferred to Lancashire when I was about seventeen, but after he retired, he and Katharine took a flat here.

"Willie Bradford is a little younger, but he worked for the same bank for a little while. My

father took quite a liking to him, but he was never as close to us as the Postons until he married a girl who lived down the street from us. He met her at our house, as a matter of fact."

"Are they still married?" asked Carmichael, noticing that there was no Mrs. Bradford on his list.

"No." She shook her head. "It was rather tragic. She died about three years after they were married. Willie was very broken up about it, and he spent a great deal of time with us after her death. He's been away in Italy a lot lately—he left the bank and opened an art gallery—but when Dad mentioned he was back in town, I called to invite him."

"Italy," murmured Carmichael. "Would he have brought the contessa then?"

"Yes." She nodded. "None of us had ever met her before, but I believe she and Willie recently got engaged. She's a widow, you see."

Carmichael raised a bushy eyebrow but said nothing. "That brings us to the Gledhills," he said.

"Martin and Joan," she said. "Martin went to university with my father—they roomed together until Dad met Mother and married. They've stayed very close through the years.

Martin became a solicitor, and he always handled Dad's business until he retired. He's running for Parliament this fall."

She did not appear to notice the dismay her words produced in the detectives. This case was going to be delicate as it was; no one wanted a politician worried about his career involved.

"Now if we could talk about the events of this evening," said Carmichael gently. "You were giving this party tonight? Just so. So you must have arrived before the other guests?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded. "I cooked the dinner, you see. So I was here by four thirty."

"Your father was here, too?"

"Yes, of course. He chatted with me in the kitchen while I was cooking."

"He seemed in good spirits?"

"Oh yes. He was looking forward to the party tonight. He was in good health for his age, but he tired easily and didn't go out much."

"Very understandable at seventy-two," said Carmichael, who was rather tired himself. He sipped his coffee. "What time did people start to arrive?"

"At about seven, I think, or perhaps a bit before. Katharine came first—she had made the cake and some hors d'oeuvres, you see, and she lives just downstairs."

"That would be Katharine Poston?" Carmichael glanced at his list. Next to Mrs. Poston's name was a note: "Discovered body at nine fifty."

"I see," Carmichael went on. "So the guests came about seven. Did you leave the door open for them?"

"Oh no. It locks automatically. They rang, and we let them in."

"When did you last see your father?"

She caught her breath, and tears welled in her eyes. She brushed them away impatiently. "After dinner," she replied and cleared her throat. "It was after dinner, about nine. He was getting uncomfortable, you see, sitting at the table. So we moved into the living room for coffee and present opening. He said he was a little tired and would just rest a moment in the study while Laura and I got the coffee. That was where he usually sat, you see. He seldom used the living room after Mother died."

"So he went off to the study, and the other guests went into the living room," said Carmichael. "You then went to the kitchen?"

"Laura Poston and I cleared the table first. Well, Laura started to help me, but then I sent her in to Dad with a glass of brandy. He sometimes liked

a little after dinner, and I thought it might pick him up."

"So you finished clearing up yourself?"

"That's right. I got everything out to the kitchen, and then Laura came back and rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher while I got out the coffee things. We had to brew two pots of coffee—Dad's coffee maker isn't very big—and then we carried it into the living room."

"That was about what time?"

"Oh dear. I'm not sure exactly. A bit after nine thirty, I suppose."

"So from nine o'clock until sometime after nine thirty, you were here or in the kitchen? Did you see anyone else besides Miss Poston?"

"No. Oh yes, Laurence came in here to get everyone a brandy. We chatted for a moment about how well it was going. I'm sorry, I haven't the least idea what the time might have been. I'd gotten everything cleared, I remember. I was folding up the tablecloth while we talked."

"That would be your brother, Laurence Wilkinson? Yes. Were all the guests present when you took the coffee into the living room?"

"I think so. At least, I didn't notice anyone missing."

"You poured the coffee?"

"Yes, and Laura passed it around. We all got settled, and then I said I had better get Dad. But Katharine said no, I'd run around enough, she'd call him." Her eyes looked blank, as if she still could not believe what happened next. "She went into the study but came right back out and closed the door behind her. She said something dreadful had happened, that he was dead. I got up, but she said I shouldn't go in. She said he'd been stabbed."

"Yes, I'm afraid there was no mistaking that," said Carmichael. "That's all very clear, Mrs. Gooden. Now, I'd just like to ask you if you could tell us something about your father. He was retired, we know. Had he lived in this flat very long?"

"Oh yes, quite some time. More than fifteen years. He and Mother moved here from the house in the suburbs after he retired."

"Had he any enemies that you know of?"

"No, none at all." She leaned forward earnestly. "He wasn't the sort that made enemies. Everyone liked him. He was always very genial, very pleasant. He hadn't a temper at all, and he loved a good joke. He found lots of things amusing. He was a very cheerful sort of person." She was crying again now, her voice breaking as she

tried to convince them how impossible it was that anyone would have wanted to harm her father.

"He was well-off?" asked Carmichael, trying for a less painful subject.

She nodded, dabbing at her eyes with the already wet handkerchief. "There was some family money, and he did well for himself in business. He invested very wisely. He's really quite rich these days, but he wasn't at all stingy. Mother used to tease him about being such an easy touch. I don't think he ever refused to help anyone if he could."

"I take it you and Mr. Wilkinson will inherit?"

"Yes, I expect so." It was clear she hadn't thought of it and didn't care. "We're the only children." She sniffed and blew her nose.

"You've been very helpful, Mrs. Gooden." Carmichael smiled encouragingly at her. "We'll try to clear this up as quickly as we can. I have just one last question for you. Was this dagger your father's?"

She gazed at it through the plastic and shook her head. "I've never seen it before," she said, "although it looks like something he might have liked. But it wasn't his. Grant and I live quite close—I was always popping in on Dad. Even if he'd

bought it recently, he would have shown it to me."

"I see." Carmichael frowned, puzzled. Gibbons leaned forward and murmured something, and the superintendent's expression turned to one of annoyance. "Of course," he said. "That was stupid of me. Mrs. Gooden, did your father receive any gifts today?"

She had been staring fearfully at the dagger, having realized what it was, but now she looked up, astonished.

"Of course," she answered. "Everyone brought something. They're all on a table in the study."

"I meant," explained Carmichael, "gifts he had already opened."

"No," she answered. "We were saving them all for tonight."

"There was a quantity of wrapping paper in the study wastebasket," said Carmichael.

"Well, it wasn't there earlier," she said firmly, and paused. "I suppose," she added doubtfully, "he might have opened one while he was resting. He was quite a child about presents—he wanted to open them before dinner, but Katharine and I were busy in the kitchen."

"Perhaps that's what happened then," said Carmichael

evenly. "Thank you very much for your help, Mrs. Gooden. It was very brave of you to be able to speak to us so soon. We appreciate it."

Gibbons rose to escort her to the door, sliding the heavy panel closed again behind her. "That's clear enough then," he said.

Carmichael was gazing at the dagger. "It must have been a gift," he muttered. "That box we found would fit it well enough." He raised his head. "What was that, sergeant?"

Gibbons repeated his remark, adding, "They finished dinner at nine, and Wilkinson went into the study. The doctor says death occurred between nine ten and nine fifty. Laura Poston may have been the last person to see him alive, when she took him the brandy. Do you want her in next, sir?"

"No," said Carmichael, "let's have the woman who found him, the downstairs neighbor. Katharine Poston." He sipped his coffee while Gibbons communicated with the constable outside. "It's damned warm in here with those doors shut," Carmichael continued, his temper clearly not improved even by such a helpful witness. He looked over his shoulder at Bethancourt. "Having a nice time?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, thank you," responded Bethancourt promptly, and Carmichael grunted. Behind his back, Gibbons rolled his eyes at his friend, who merely grinned.

In another moment, Katharine Poston was escorted in by the constable. She was a tall, elegant woman in her middle sixties, and still possessed some of the beauty that had been hers in youth. Her face showed a strong, even-tempered character, and although she was clearly shocked by the evening's events, she had not lost control of herself. She sat down quietly and turned intelligent dark eyes on the superintendent. She asked if she might smoke.

"Certainly," answered Carmichael, pushing the ashtray towards her. "Now, Mrs. Poston, I understand you were the one to find Mr. Wilkinson?"

She nodded briefly.

It had been ten minutes to ten when she had gone to the study to call him and had found him murdered. Before that she had not seen him since they had left the dining room after dinner.

"And you remained in the living room until you went to call Mr. Wilkinson?"

"For the most part. I did go to the lavatory once."

"Do you remember when that was?"

She frowned for a moment in concentration. "Yes, let's see. It was just after Clare came in with the coffee. I looked at my watch then—it was nine thirty-five. I went out while they were still pouring." She looked up at him. "I was checking the time because I knew my husband was getting tired, you see, and I was anxious to get things started. The present opening, I mean."

"That's very clear. Can you remember, while you were in the living room, if everyone else stayed there as well?"

She tackled the rather difficult question without protest. "Well, Joan Gledhill and the contessa were there because I was talking to them. And my husband was sitting next to me. Clare and Laura were in the kitchen, of course. Oh, and Laurence went out to fetch the brandies at some point. I'm not sure about the others. They were certainly there, but if one of them slipped out for a moment, I don't expect I'd have noticed."

Carmichael was clearly warming to this witness who checked her watch regularly and had such a clear memory.

"Would you have noticed if anyone had gone into the study

using the door from the living room?" he asked.

"I think so," she answered. "I was facing the door, which was closed. Since we were all waiting for James, I think I would have noticed if anyone had gone in. I can't be sure, of course. And in any case, I certainly did not see anyone do so."

"All right," said Carmichael, nodding. "Now, if we could just go over when you found the deceased. I understand Mrs. Gooden said something about calling him?"

"Yes, that's right." She stubbed out her cigarette. "As I said, I was anxious to get on with the rest of the evening. Clare said it was getting late, she had better call James, and I said I would do it. She had only been settled with her coffee for five minutes. So I got up and went to the study—"

"You entered from the living room or from the hallway?"

"From the living room. I opened the door, looking round it as I came in, expecting to see him in his chair at the desk. I was just about to call his name." Her grey eyes were staring bleakly at the polished surface of the table. "For a moment, when I saw him, I couldn't take it in. That something was wrong registered immediately, but just for a min-

ute, I couldn't think what it was."

"It was a shocking sight," said Carmichael kindly.

"Yes." She drew a deep breath.

"What did you do next?" he prompted her.

Her hand strayed to the string of pearls she wore and she fingered them uneasily. "I went into the room. I went over to him, but I knew at once it was no use."

"Did you touch anything at all?"

"I just felt for a pulse in his wrist. I knew it was futile, but, well, I kept hoping."

"That's very natural. Did you move the body at all?"

"No, I just felt at his wrist. Then I left. I closed the door behind me and told everyone what had happened."

"Did you notice how anyone reacted?"

"They were all very shocked, of course," she said slowly. "Clare wanted to go in, but I wouldn't let her. Grant, Clare's husband, kept his head best. He asked me if I was sure, and then he and Willie Bradford went in to make certain."

"Did they stay long in the study?"

"No, only a moment. Then Grant went to the bedroom to telephone."

Carmichael nodded. "Thank you, Mrs. Poston. I know this must have been distressing for you, and we appreciate the effort you've made. Just one or two other questions." He moved the dagger in front of her. "Do you recognize this?"

She started to reply in the negative and then paused and said, "It's—it's what he was killed with, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," replied Carmichael. "Had you ever seen it before?"

"No," she answered, but she was frowning, puzzled.

"Does it seem familiar in some way?" asked Carmichael.

"No, no. It's not that. I just didn't think before—it's a very odd thing to use for a murder, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Carmichael. He was about to dismiss her when Gibbons interrupted, raising his head from his notebook.

"If I might just ask, sir, what Mrs. Poston's gift to the deceased was?"

"Oh yes," said Carmichael. "Yes, we'd best identify all those packages."

"We gave him an illustrated book on art in the sixteenth century," she replied. "He was interested in that sort of thing—he had several books on the subject, but this was a new one with lots of color plates."

"Very nice," said Carmichael. "How is it wrapped?"

"In patterned paper," she answered. "Rather a medieval pattern in faded red and gold."

"That's clear then—in fact, I think I remember it. Thank you very much, Mrs. Poston. You've been very helpful."

She nodded and rose, but then paused, half-turned to go. "Would it be at all possible, superintendent, for you to see my husband next? He's not in the best of health, and he's almost asleep in his chair as it is."

"You live in this building, don't you?" asked Carmichael, and she nodded. "Well, we like to be helpful if we can. After we see your husband, I'll send a constable to escort you to your flat. However, you understand that if we have further questions tonight, we'll have to wake you."

"Of course. It's very kind of you, superintendent." Her voice was grateful. "I could come back after I've got my husband settled, if you prefer."

Carmichael waved a hand. "No, get your rest, Mrs. Poston. Thank you again. I wish," he added, after she had gone, "that my wife was putting me to bed. Is there any more coffee?"

"I'll get some," said Bethancourt, rising. He collected the cups and went into the kitchen,

thus missing the entrance of John Poston.

He looked much older than his wife and moved with a certain amount of stiffness and caution. He was very gaunt and looked rather as if he had just been awakened. Once settled in his chair, however, he was perfectly attentive, showing that whatever frailties his body was subject to, his mind was still alert. He answered their questions quietly, but in his eyes there was a deep sadness.

He too had last seen James Wilkinson as they left the dinner table, but he could not tell them much more.

"I was rather tired after dinner," he said. "A large meal tends to have a stupefying effect on me these days. And Clare," he added, irritably, "was an unconscionably long time with that coffee. She could have sent to Colombia for it in the time it took her."

Both policemen smiled, and just then Bethancourt entered with a tray and four cups of coffee.

"I had to brew another pot," he explained. "You'll have some, sir?" He added to Poston, who nodded gratefully.

"It took you forever," said Carmichael, grinning. "You could have sent to Colombia for it."

"I did," replied Bethancourt coolly, and the others chuckled. Bethancourt took his cup and retired to his corner. Carmichael sipped the steaming coffee and said:

"You make better coffee than that constable."

"Thank you, sir," said Bethancourt. "I thought so myself."

Carmichael chuckled again and returned to his enquiry.

Poston had settled himself in an armchair in the living room and listened to his wife's conversation with Joan Gledhill and the contessa. He had heard Grant Gooden and Martin Gledhill talking behind him and thought they had remained there at least until after the brandy had come in. After that, he was not sure; people had been moving about then, and some of them might have left the room. His wife, for instance, had gone to the ladies'.

But although Poston was weary and anxious for his coffee, he had not looked at his watch. In fact, when he had learned it was nearly ten o'clock when the murder was discovered, he had been very surprised. He had not thought that much time had passed since leaving the dining room.

Carmichael let him go and told off a constable to see the Postons to their flat.

"All the Postons, sir?"

"There's a daughter, sir," put in Gibbons. "Laura Poston—the woman who took the brandy in to Wilkinson after supper."

"We'll have her next," said Carmichael. "Just the parents go downstairs, constable."

Laura Poston was an attractive woman of about thirty. She floated in, trailing peach chiffon, and sank gracefully into the chair. She smiled vaguely at all of them.

If her mother had been a policeman's dream witness, Laura Poston was designed to try a detective's soul. She was wholly unobservant and very vague as to times. She did not wear a watch, but none of her listeners thought it would have made any difference if she had. They were left with the impression that if a herd of elephants had trampled through the living room, she might possibly have remembered it, but that anything less would have failed to arouse her attention.

It took a great deal of tiresome questioning to ascertain her own movements. After dinner, she had begun to clear the table with Clare but had stopped to take some brandy in to Wilkinson. She had found him at his desk, talking with Willie Bradford. Bradford had left when she came in, and she had given Wilkinson the

brandy and chatted with him for a minute or two. She did not remember if he had drunk any of the brandy while she was there. Asked if he seemed to be in good spirits, she said she supposed so—she hadn't really noticed.

"What did you talk about?" asked Carmichael patiently.

"Oh, I don't remember," she answered. "The dinner, I expect. He said how nice Mother's cake was. I can't cook, myself."

"Did he open any of his gifts while you were there?"

"No. We were going to do that later."

"You didn't notice if there was any wrapping paper in the wastebasket?"

She looked confused. "The wastebasket?" she said. "Where was it?"

Carmichael abandoned the attempt.

"So you left him alone and returned to the kitchen?"

"Yes, I helped Clare clean up."

"Do you remember what time it was when you left the study?"

"No. Wait. Yes, I think it was nine thirty." She beamed at him like a pupil who had just correctly answered a difficult question.

She had returned to the kitchen and done the dishes while Clare made coffee. She did not know if Clare had left

the kitchen; she thought she might have.

"If she did leave the kitchen," said Carmichael, whose patience was fraying, "how long was she gone for?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Five minutes? Half an hour?"

"Something like that, I suppose."

She did seem certain that she herself had remained in the kitchen until she had helped Clare bring in the coffee. She had no idea what time that had been, nor if all the guests were present in the living room then. She had given Wilkinson a scarf, wrapped in flowered paper by the shop.

Carmichael thanked her and watched her float out of the room with an exasperated look in his eyes.

"Well," ventured Gibbons, "it's better than someone who makes things up in their eagerness to help. At least she admits she doesn't know."

"There's that," agreed Carmichael ungratefully. He sighed and stretched. "She said she left him alive and well at nine thirty. I wonder how reliable that is."

"I should think it was, sir," put in Bethancourt. "She hadn't the least idea what time anything else happened. I'd say it's likely Wilkinson himself

pointed out the time to her. There's a clock in the study."

"That's a thought," said Carmichael. "I was thinking myself it was odd she'd noticed the time just that once, but that's a very handy explanation. Unless, of course," he added, neutrally, "she killed the old man herself."

"But if she's telling the truth," said Gibbons, "that's a help. If he was alive at nine thirty, and Mrs. Poston found him at nine fifty, there's only twenty minutes to account for."

"True enough," said Carmichael. He studied his list. "Still six more to see," he said. "I suppose we'd better have the son next. Tell the constable, will you, Gibbons?" He sighed and glanced at his watch. "A long night," he muttered.

Laurence Wilkinson seemed stunned by his father's death. Like his sister Clare, he protested that he had known everyone at the party (with the exception of the contessa) since he was a child; it was inconceivable that one of them would have killed the old man. Since his brother-in-law had considerably prevented him from seeing the body, only saying that Wilkinson had been stabbed, Laurence appeared to think it might have been an accident. As gently as he could,

Carmichael disabused him of this notion.

As far as the evening's events were concerned, Laurence Wilkinson was not much help. He thought they had finished dinner at about nine and had gone into the living room. He had offered brandy and, after some discussion, everyone had accepted and he had gone back to the dining room to fetch it. He had no idea what time it was then except that several minutes had passed since they had adjourned from the table. He had seen his sister in the dining room—she had come in from the kitchen—and they had chatted for a few minutes while he got out the glasses. He had taken the drinks into the living room shortly before his sister arrived with the coffee, say, five minutes. He had not left the living room after that and had not noticed if anyone else had done so. He did not recognize the dagger. His gift to his father had been a new jacket—the largest of the boxes in the study, wrapped in gold.

Grant Gooden came in next. He was a thin, sober man of about forty, well-built and fit looking. He sat down quietly enough, but he was clearly holding back a great anger.

"I cannot understand it," he said stiffly. "My father-in-law was a warm, generous man. He

was gentle and happy. I simply cannot understand how someone who knew him well could possibly kill him. It seems so impossible, and yet," his dark eyes glinted, "one of them must have done it."

His own movements seemed above suspicion. He had gone to the living room with the others after supper and stayed there. He had talked mostly to Martin Gledhill until the coffee came in, which he confirmed was at about nine thirty-five. At that time he had gone to sit by his wife.

"You were still seated there when Mrs. Poston went to call Mr. Wilkinson?"

"Yes, I was."

"I understand that after her announcement you and Mr. Bradford went into the study?"

He nodded, and the anger shone from his eyes again. "Katharine's a very capable woman—I didn't really believe she'd make a mistake, but I thought someone had better make certain. I took Willie Bradford with me so there would be a witness."

"Why Mr. Bradford?"

"He was sitting next to me in a chair." Gooden shrugged. "It was easiest to suggest it to him."

"What did you do in the study?"

"Nothing." He spit the word out. "There was nothing to be done. We saw at once that he was dead. We didn't touch him, or anything else for that matter. We took a good look and came out."

There was little else he could add. He confirmed that the Gledhills and the Postons had all remained in the living room until after the coffee was brought in; he rather thought Bradford had excused himself to go to the toilet at some point but had returned by the time Laurence had come in with the brandy. He couldn't say for sure how long Bradford might have been out of the room.

"And I'm certain Katharine went out for a moment or two while Clare was serving the coffee. She wasn't there to take her cup."

He did not recognize the dagger, and after that Carmichael let him go.

The night was still stifling and very quiet. The smoke from Bethancourt's cigarettes hung heavy in the air above them. The superintendent looked suddenly old, and even Gibbons, who had planned to be dancing at this hour, was squinting tiredly at his notes. Bethancourt had long ago removed his jacket, but behind his glasses his eyes were still alert. He was more used to late hours than

the others, but he was growing tired of hearing the same questions and answers again and again. He was playing a game with himself now, trying to spot the murderer as each new witness came in. He knew he hadn't the slightest chance of success.

Carmichael was rubbing his eyes. "Bethancourt," he said, "is there any of that last pot left?"

"Yes, sir." Bethancourt rose. "I'll just fetch it from the kitchen."

Gibbons laid down his pen and notebook and leaned back in his chair while Carmichael rose and wandered toward the window.

"We'll have a bit of a break," he said. "Let's have those doors open and let some air in."

Gibbons rose and slid back the heavy panels, signaling the constable outside to wait before bringing in the next witness, but the addition of fresh air was not very noticeable. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and ruffled up his hair with both hands.

"I'm glad we let the Postons go," said Carmichael to the witness.

"Yes, sir. It would have been a pity to keep the old gentleman up."

Bethancourt returned with the coffee pot and refilled the

cups. The others came back to the table and sipped from their mugs, still standing.

"That's good," said Carmichael. Then he set his cup down and reseated himself. "We'd best go on," he said. "Who are we having next, Gibbons?"

"William Bradford, sir."

"That's right. Well, have him brought in."

William Bradford was a slight man with a thick head of iron grey hair. He was probably about sixty but looked younger. He had an engaging smile, even if it was tired and rather perfunctory at the moment. His voice, when he spoke, was soft but clear.

He had accompanied Wilkinson to the study after dinner and stayed chatting for a few minutes. Wilkinson had appeared tired but otherwise in good spirits. When Laura entered with the brandy, he took the opportunity to leave the old man to rest and made his way to the living room. He chatted with the others for a while—he was unsure how long—and then excused himself to go to the toilet. On returning, he had seen Laura emerging from the study and spoke briefly to her.

"Do you know what time that might have been, sir?" asked Carmichael.

Bradford hesitated. "Yes, I think it was nine thirty," he

answered. "I asked Laura if James was going to join us soon, saying it was getting late. She asked me what time it was, and I looked at my watch."

"Very good. And after that?"

Bradford had gone into the living room and stayed there. Laurence was just bringing the brandies in, and he had taken a glass and joined the contessa. He was unsure whether anyone had left the room after that, except that he remembered that Martin Gledhill, whom he had been talking to, had gone to the bathroom just before the coffee came in.

He did not recognize the dagger but said it was the sort of thing James Wilkinson would have had.

"He was very interested in sixteenth century artifacts," he said. "He had some snuffboxes from the same period."

After Bradford had gone, Carmichael mopped his brow with his handkerchief and said gloomily, "Splendid. Now we have a man running for M.P. who was out of the room at the crucial time."

"It seems so, sir," said Gibbons neutrally.

Carmichael sighed. "Let's talk to him, then."

Martin Gledhill looked as if he should be running for Parliament. He was a tall, distinguished looking man with a

firm jawline and silvery hair. He did not complain about being nearly the last to be interviewed, but his manner betrayed his irritation. He was outraged that his friend should be murdered and equally outraged that he should be questioned about it. He sat down in the offered chair and stared at them.

Neither did he have much new to add. After dinner he had gone to the living room and stayed there until he had gone to the bathroom. Clare Gooden had been bringing the coffee in as he left, and he had returned quickly—Clare was just starting to pour out when he got back. While in the living room, he had been in conversation with Grant Gooden, and they had been joined by Willie Bradford at some point.

His tone as he presented this information made it even clearer that he thought Carmichael was mad to waste time interviewing him and that he strongly disapproved of madness in the police.

"That's very clear, sir," said Carmichael, unmoved by any aspersions cast on his sanity. "Just one last question. Do you recognize this?" He exposed the dagger in its plastic bag.

Gledhill looked horrified. All at once his composure shattered as he stared at the

weapon. Then he raised his eyes to Carmichael's.

"Is it—was he killed with that?" he asked.

Carmichael nodded, watching him intensely with cold blue eyes. "Do you recognize it?"

"Yes." Gledhill nodded weakly. "That was our birthday gift to James. At least," he added, pulling himself together, "may I see it?"

Carmichael pushed it towards him, and Gledhill took it up, examining it closely through the plastic. His shoulders sagged as he replaced it on the table.

"Yes," he repeated. "I'm afraid that's it."

"How was it wrapped?" asked Carmichael.

Gledhill appeared bewildered by this question and struggled with it for a moment before replying, "In striped paper. Green, I think. My wife wrapped it."

"And who knew about the gift?"

"Knew about . . . oh, I see." Hope dawned in Gledhill's eyes. "Well, there was no particular secret about it, and I was very pleased to have found it. I'm sure I must have mentioned it to Clare and, oh yes, to Willie Bradford. He had found a snuffbox, and we chatted about it."

"Did you give Mr. Wilkinson any hint about it?" asked Carmichael. "James Wilkinson, I mean."

"Certainly not. It would have spoiled the surprise."

"That's true, sir." Carmichael glanced over his shoulder and beckoned to Bethancourt, who rose with alacrity.

"Have the constable bring in Mrs. Gledhill," he murmured to him. "Then have him and the other constable ask the others—individually, mind you, not as a group—whether they knew about the Gledhills' gift."

"Certainly, sir." Bethancourt slipped out while Carmichael returned to his witness.

Bethancourt loitered in the hall until Mrs. Gledhill was safely closeted in the dining room, and then he took it upon himself to help the constables with their second chore.

The group in the living room was a pitiful sight. All the men had removed their jackets in the heat, and their faces were damp with perspiration. Grant Gooden sat by his wife on the sofa, holding her hand but clearly having run out of soothing words. He looked helpless. Clare had cried herself out and now sat simply forlorn, clutching her husband's hand. Her brother Laurence sat in an armchair on her other side, staring into a glass of brandy,

his red-rimmed eyes proof that he also had been weeping. On the other side of the room, Willie Bradford sat by the contessa with his head in his hands. Beyond them, in the window seat, Laura Poston had curled up and gone to sleep.

Bethancourt stepped toward Clare Gooden and asked in a soft voice if he might have a word with her. She nodded wearily and took the hand he held out to help her up while her husband asked, a little sharply, "What is it now?"

"Just something we need verified," said Bethancourt smoothly, leading Clare towards the door. He stopped just before they reached the hall and put his question to her while the constables moved in on her husband and brother.

"Did you know what gifts the other guests were giving your father?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she answered, pushing a bedraggled lock of hair back behind her ear. "Most of them told me. Laurence gave him a new Harris tweed jacket, I know. Let's see." She tried to concentrate. "The Postons gave a book on sixteenth century art—Katharine showed it to me before she wrapped it. Now, the Gledhills—oh, of course. Martin had found a replica of a sixteenth century bodkin, and Willie Bradford had gotten

something like that, too. I can't remember just what it was. And I think Laura got him a scarf." She looked up at him, her blue eyes hazy with fatigue and pain. "Does that help?"

Bethancourt smiled at her. "Very much." He put a hand on her elbow and steered her back towards the sofa. "Superintendent Carmichael's almost finished now. He'll be out in a moment to send you all home."

She nodded and returned to her husband, who was still talking to one of the constables. The other officer had finished with Laurence Wilkinson and was now speaking with Bradford and the contessa. Bethancourt went over to the window seat and knelt to shake Laura Poston's shoulder. She stirred beneath his hand and opened sleepy blue eyes. She smiled lazily at him.

"Hello," she said. "Are you taking me home?"

He grinned at her. "No," he answered. "I want to ask you a question."

"Oh." She yawned.

"Did you know what everyone was giving Mr. Wilkinson for his birthday?"

"I bought him a scarf." She pillowed her cheek on one hand but made no attempt to sit up. "A nice cashmere one, for winter."

Bethancourt wondered where she had found such a thing in midsummer but stuck to his point. "What about the others?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I think Mum and Dad got him a book." She seemed ready to go back to sleep at any moment.

"That's good," said Bethancourt encouragingly. "How about the Gledhills?"

"Haven't the least notion," she answered. "I think I'd like you to, you know," she added.

"Like me to what?" asked Bethancourt, confused.

She smiled kittenishly. "Take me home, of course," she replied. "You're very attractive."

"So are you," replied Bethancourt gallantly. "But I do need to know about these presents."

It was no use. She was only interested in having him take her home or, failing that, going back to sleep. If she had ever heard about any of the other gifts, she had clearly forgotten it at once.

Bethancourt joined the constables in the hallway to compare notes. Grant Gooden had not been able to recall what any of the gifts were but was sure he had heard about them at some point. His wife, on returning to the sofa, confirmed that she had told him and, when prompted by her, it

seemed to come back to him. Laurence Wilkinson had no more than a vague impression that there were some sixteenth century artifacts among the gifts. Clare had told him that, he said.

Willie Bradford admitted to knowing about the dagger, although he had had to think before he could remember it. Unlike Clare, both he and Gooden had realized the Gledhills' gift was the murder weapon as soon as they recollected it. The contessa, since she did not know the others, knew only about Bradford's gift.

Bethancourt reentered the dining room where Carmichael was just thanking the Gledhills for their help and assuring them that he would do what he could to prevent the press from knowing that their gift had been used to murder their friend.

When they had gone, Bethancourt reported the results from the living room, and Carmichael nodded.

"Mrs. Gledhill said she had discussed the dagger with Katharine Poston as well," he said. "We can confirm that tomorrow." He sighed. "Well, we'd best see the contessa now. Not that I think she can tell us anything."

The Contessa di Caravaggio was in her fifties and still a re-

markably lovely woman. Her English was flawless, and she used it to inform them that in Italy the police would have considered it unthinkable to keep her there for hours. Carmichael could not possibly think that she had anything to do with this terrible tragedy, and they would be hearing from the Italian ambassador in the morning. She was not, she informed them, a woman to be trifled with and tortured in this inexpressible manner.

Carmichael managed to ascertain that she had gone to the living room after dinner and had stayed there, talking to Joan Gledhill and Katharine Poston for the most part. She had noticed nothing and no one else. Carmichael was certain that even if she had, she wouldn't tell him.

He let her go and then leaned back and rubbed his eyes. He reached for the cigar in the ashtray, produced a lighter from his pocket, and lit the tobacco. Bethancourt, who had joined the policeman at the table, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Gibbons, who did not smoke, sighed and looked at the open windows.

"So what have we got?" said Carmichael, apparently somewhat restored by his cigar. "Laura Poston says she left him alive at nine thirty. Either she

killed him, or he was indeed alive. John Poston, Grant Gooden, Joan Gledhill, and the contessa are out of it—none of them left the living room at all."

"It also makes it difficult for Clare Gooden," said Gibbons, flipping through his notes. "Two witnesses say she and Laura Poston brought the coffee in at nine thirty-five. That doesn't give her much time."

"It gives Laurence Wilkinson and William Bradford less time," said Bethancourt. "They both seem to have come back at about the same time, just as Laura was leaving the study."

"Which leaves us with Gledhill himself and Katharine Poston," said Carmichael. "Both of whom left the living room after nine thirty." He sighed. "Whoever did it, it must have been done very quickly."

"Unpremeditated, then, sir," said Gibbons.

"That's fine as far as it goes," said Carmichael. "But unpremeditated usually means a quarrel, and no one except Laura Poston really had time for that. Nor was anything heard in the living room."

"Perhaps," offered Bethancourt, "one of them had wanted to kill him for some time and just took the opportunity when it came—lots of other suspects

in the next room and the dagger ready to hand."

"Only it wasn't," said Carmichael. "It was wrapped up in a box, and only Gledhill would know for certain that it was sharp enough to do the job. If it wasn't him, then I think Wilkinson must have opened the package himself, unlikely as that seems." He paused and then shook his head. "I'm not thinking clearly," he said. "It's too hot and it's too late. Lord," he added, glancing at his watch, "it's past three. Gibbons, go send those people home. And get the keys to the flat from Mrs. Gooden—tell her we'll be sealing the place." He rose and stretched. "We'll go over this tomorrow, after we've had some sleep."

The witnesses were only too happy to leave, and in a remarkably few minutes Bethancourt found himself alone on Grosvenor Street, looking for a taxi. Not a breath of air was stirring, and he felt decidedly warm and sticky. He lit a cigarette and began to walk towards the Soho after-hours club he and Marla usually patronized.

It was past three thirty when he finally arrived, and the air conditioning seemed like heaven. Marla was nowhere to be seen, but at a table in the back was a long, lanky figure

idly watching two young girls dancing together.

"Hello, Spence," said Bethancourt.

Spencer Kendrick, a well-known fashion photographer, peered up at him. "Hello, Philip," he said. "Have a seat." He waved a hand at a chair and turned back to watch the girls with calm grey eyes. He was a few years older than Bethancourt, having reached his thirties, but the two men had always gotten on well. Bethancourt sank gratefully into the chair and sipped appreciatively at his drink. He produced his cigarette case and lit cigarettes for both himself and Kendrick.

"Have you seen Marla, Spence?" he asked.

A smile played about the corners of Kendrick's mouth, but he remained unperturbed. Nothing had ever been known to agitate him. "She was here with Carolyn," he answered. "She left half an hour or so ago."

"Do you know where she went?"

Kendrick shrugged. He sipped his drink and, in a moment, said, "She's rather annoyed with you, Philip."

"I'm sure that's putting it mildly," said Bethancourt. "How angry is she?"

"Well," Kendrick considered, tapping his cigarette gently on the edge of the ashtray, "I shouldn't like to speak for anyone else, but she did give the impression she had broken up with you."

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt. "What did she say?"

"I don't remember all of it," answered Kendrick. "It was something to the effect that she wished you were extinct and she devoutly hoped that the next murder Jack Gibbons investigated would be yours. Then she ordered champagne to celebrate her emancipation from such a sluglike creature as yourself and asked if there were any volunteers for the position of her new boyfriend."

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt again.

"The champagne toast was given whilst she stood on a tabletop," added Kendrick. "Two chaps she would never even look at got into a fistfight over which was going to ask her to dance first. All in all, it was quite an evening."

"I can see how it might have been," said Bethancourt glumly. "Well, I don't expect I'd better go after her tonight. I'd better let her cool off and try tomorrow."

"I did try to have a talk with her," said Kendrick.

"You mean the sort of talk where she actually listened to you?"

"Yes." Kendrick nodded. "That sort of talk."

"However did you manage that?" asked Bethancourt, impressed.

"Followed her into the ladies'," replied Kendrick laconically. "I pointed out that if she didn't make such a fuss over your detective hobby, you wouldn't lie to her about it. I also pointed out that she wouldn't be so interested in you if you came running every time she called, just like a puppydog."

"Thank you, Spence."

"I don't know if it sank in, though."

"Even if it didn't, you did your best."

Kendrick shrugged. "How was the murder case?" he asked. "Interesting?"

"Very," answered Bethancourt. "A kindly, elderly gentleman who was well liked and who was apparently murdered by one of his closest friends, or his children. You would have thought they were very nice people."

"Got a suspect?"

"Not yet. One or two things need looking into."

At this point the two girls abandoned the dance floor and joined them at the table. Beth-

ancourt thought he recognized one as an up-and-coming model. She laughed when Kendrick introduced them and said, "So you're the leprous worm?"

"Yes," answered Bethancourt. "That would be me."

He left soon after that. It was nearly five by the time he dropped, exhausted, into his bed.

It was hot again the next morning. The sun was blazing, and the heat came up off the pavement in waves. Gibbons, accompanied by a wan Bethancourt and a panting Cerberus, returned to the flat to look over James Wilkinson's personal effects. He settled down at the desk in the study while Bethancourt flung open windows and brought in the fan from the living room. In the desk's top drawer, he found an orderly array of checkbooks, bank statements, credit card bills, and statements from a major investment firm. He pulled out the most recent checkbook and focused his bloodshot eyes on the cramped handwriting on the stubs.

"Here." Bethancourt, who had left the room, placed a mug of coffee on the desk.

"Thanks," said Gibbons gratefully, sipping at it.

"I forgot to ask you about fingerprints," said Bethancourt. "Anything turn up there?"

Gibbons shook his head. "We turned up Wilkinson's and Mrs. Gledhill's on the discarded wrapping paper and on the box," he said. "But that doesn't mean very much because we couldn't get anything at all off the ribbon and anybody could have carried the package by that."

"Too bad," sighed Bethancourt.

Gibbons looked back at the papers he'd removed from the drawer. "Why don't you have a look at the investments? You know more about that sort of thing than I."

"Very well." Bethancourt collected the stacks of papers and sat down in a leather easy chair.

Gibbons found the checkbook very boring. Wilkinson had written checks to pay bills, with an occasional exception for various charities. The credit card statement showed that he had spent money at a wide variety of shops and restaurants. The bank statements did not reveal any mysterious withdrawals of cash. Taken altogether, it was completely straightforward and unremarkable.

Gibbons rubbed his eyes and drained the last of the coffee from the mug. He looked over at Bethancourt, who had set aside the investment statements and was smoking a cigarette and staring out at nothing.

"How are those investments?" asked Gibbons.

"Splendid," answered his friend. "All above-board and returning very nicely. In fact, he's done one or two things that I might consider . . ."

"Is there more coffee?" interrupted Gibbons.

"Yes, of course." Bethancourt, still mulling over investment opportunities, collected the mugs and left for the kitchen, followed wearily by his dog.

Gibbons continued to work through the desk. There was a drawer full of up-to-date insurance policies, another devoted to correspondence, much of which was decades old. There were family snapshots and book reviews cut out of the *TLS*. There were articles on sixteenth century art and catalogues from antique auctions. And there was nothing extraordinary in any of it.

"It's long past time for lunch," said Bethancourt as Gibbons closed a drawer containing old tax returns and re-

ceipts. "Let's go somewhere air-conditioned."

"There's only one drawer left," answered Gibbons. "Let's just see what's in it and then we'll go."

He pulled open the bottom drawer on the left and stared. It was empty.

"Well, that's that," said Bethancourt briskly. "Let's be off."

"It doesn't make sense," said Gibbons. "The other drawers were overflowing. He *must* have kept something in here."

"Well, it's not there now," retorted Bethancourt, who was very hungry. "We can guess what it might have been while we eat."

Reluctantly, Gibbons let himself be persuaded away, but remained preoccupied until Bethancourt remarked that if it was that important, he could tell Mrs. Gooden and ask her about it. After that, Gibbons bolted the rest of his food in his rush to return to the flat.

Mrs. Gooden sounded weary over the phone. She had to think for several moments before she could answer the questions, and then she began listing the contents of the bottom right drawer. Apprised of her error, she considered further and then announced abruptly, "Oh, of course. How could I be so silly? That was drawer he kept his manuscript in."

"His manuscript?" asked Gibbons.

"Yes—do you mean it's gone?" She sounded faintly hysterical, and Gibbons wished he had had the foresight to interview her in person.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Gooden," he said. "Can you tell me about the manuscript? What was it about?"

"He was writing his memoirs," she answered. "But how could it have gone? It was there yesterday—he was working at it when I arrived, and I saw him put it away in the drawer."

"I'm sure we'll be able to find it," said Gibbons soothingly and untruthfully. "Had he been working on it long?"

"Almost a year," she replied tearfully. "At least, he had the idea almost a year ago, but he couldn't seem to get started. Then about six months ago he got inspired, and he's been very prolific since then. He must have done three or four hundred pages."

"In his own writing?" asked Gibbons.

"Oh yes. He was going to hire someone to type it when he was done."

"Had you read any of it, Mrs. Gooden?"

"A few pages, in the beginning. There was a very lovely part about how he met my mother. But he hasn't let me

see any of it since he really got going. He said he thought it would be better to read it all at once when it was done. I don't think he's let anyone see it since then."

"But others knew he was writing it?"

"Oh yes. He spoke of it often, especially when he was just starting. I think everyone knew."

Gibbons thanked her, assured her the investigation was proceeding apace, and rang off.

"Well, this is beginning to make more sense," he said after he had finished detailing the conversation to Bethancourt. "Here we have a man writing his memoirs and a very old group of his friends as suspects."

"Three or four hundred pages," mused Bethancourt. "That's quite a lot of paper. You couldn't fold it up and put it in your pocket."

"No," agreed Gibbons. "You could roll it up, I suppose, but it would still be bulky. And no one was wearing a coat in this weather."

"All the men had jackets with them," said Bethancourt. "They'd taken them off—I suppose they could have concealed the manuscript underneath a jacket tossed over their arms or whatever."

"Yes, or the women might have put it in a handbag if the handbag was big enough."

Bethancourt considered this. "Not Katharine Poston," he said. "She took her cigarettes out of her bag when we interviewed her. It was a small, beaded thing. And not Laura Poston. She had her bag next to her when I asked her about the dagger. It wasn't much bigger than her mother's. I don't know about the others."

"The thing to do," said Gibbons, "is to get hold of those constables and see if they remember anyone carrying anything out. Mr. and Mrs. Gledhill in particular. After all, they have the most to lose from some dirty bit of their past coming to light."

"True," agreed Bethancourt. "It would kill his election to Parliament if the tabloids got hold of anything—and it wouldn't matter if it was fifty years old."

"We also," said Gibbons, "have to consider that the murderer may have hidden the manuscript rather than taking it with him. And we'd better read all those old letters—they might provide a clue. You can start on the search while I try to get hold of the constables."

Bethancourt looked vaguely about him. "Um, Jack?" he said as Gibbons reached for the

phone. "Where should I start looking?"

Gibbons snorted. He abandoned the phone and took some of the letters from their drawer. "Never mind," he said. "I'll do the search. You can read these. You're a faster reader than I am, anyway."

Not surprisingly, neither constable was presently on duty, but Gibbons obtained their home numbers from the station. He was just picking up the receiver to try them when Cerberus lifted his head and pricked his ears. In one swift, graceful motion the huge dog was on his feet, his attention centered on the open doorway. Both men paused, and in the silence they heard clearly a key turning in the lock.

They exchanged glances, and then Gibbons rose quietly and stationed himself to one side of the doorway. Bethancourt went to stand by his pet, laying one hand lightly on his muzzle to keep him quiet. They heard the door of the flat open and close, and then footsteps came rapidly down the hall. In another moment Katharine Poston stepped into the room.

She gave a shriek when she saw Bethancourt, clutching the sheaf of papers she held to her chest, and another as Gibbons came up beside her, saying, "Don't be alarmed, Mrs.

Poston. I'm Detective Sergeant Gibbons—we spoke to you last night."

She drew a deep breath and relaxed.

"Yes, of course," she said shakily. "I was just startled. I didn't know anyone was here."

"You'd better sit down," said Bethancourt, drawing up the chair he had been sitting in.

She sank into it, but the tension had returned to her shoulders and she avoided their eyes.

"Well, Mrs. Poston," said Gibbons cheerfully, "did you come to return Mr. Wilkinson's manuscript? That's what it is, isn't it?"

She nodded, not looking up.

"May I see it?"

"Of course." She recovered herself and handed the manuscript to him. "I was just returning it. I was supposed to bring it by last night, but I forgot."

"So you thought you'd just pop up and put it back today?" said Gibbons. "But why, Mrs. Poston? Mr. Wilkinson certainly has no need of it any more. Why did you feel the need to return it so urgently?"

For a moment she was at a loss, but only for a moment. "I—that is, it was given me to read in confidence," she said. "James thought Clare might feel slighted if she knew I had read it first. I didn't know when

she would start going through his things, so I thought it best to get it back at once."

Gibbons was shaking his head. "That really won't do," he said. "Mrs. Gooden has already informed us that the manuscript was here last night—her father was working on it when she arrived. I think you were worried about something you thought he might have written about you."

"Nonsense," she replied spiritedly. "How could I be? The manuscript is fiction. There's nothing about me in it at all."

"Fiction?" repeated Gibbons, startled. He glanced down at the first page.

"Even if that's true," put in Bethancourt, "you couldn't have known that before you took it last night."

She stared at him. "You can't think," she said, horrified, "that I killed him? For a manuscript?"

"It's a possibility to be considered," said Gibbons evenly. He paused to let it sink in and then continued, "Come now, Mrs. Poston. Don't you think you'd better tell us all about it?"

"I have done," she said firmly. "James gave it to me to read, and I wanted to put it back before Clare found out."

They could get nothing more from her and at last Gibbons

sighed and said, "I think, Mrs. Poston, you had better come down to Scotland Yard with me and have a little chat with Superintendent Carmichael."

Bethancourt replaced the phone receiver thoughtfully. He had just left his fourth message of the day on Marla's answering machine. She had not replied to any of them, and he was beginning to wonder if she really meant to leave him this time. It was not like her not to call to make her views on his behavior perfectly clear.

The phone rang and he snatched it up—nonchalance would do him no good at this point. But it was only Gibbons.

"It looks as if the manuscript is fiction," he said. "I've read the first couple of pages myself. It starts out with a racy bit in Marseilles, and Mrs. Gooden says her father had never been there. Anyway, she's coming to check it out, and we've got a couple of chaps going through it to make sure none of it's missing."

"I don't see that it makes any difference if it is fiction," replied Bethancourt. "As I pointed out before, Mrs. Poston wouldn't have known that until she saw it."

"I know," said Gibbons, "and I certainly don't believe that he

gave it to her several days ago. But one thing bothers me."

"What's that?"

"She had the keys to his flat. If she was worried about what he was writing, why didn't she just wait until he went out, and then nip up and take a look?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Bethancourt.

"I've got to go," said Gibbons abruptly. "Carmichael's just come in, and he wants me in the interview room with him. I'll speak to you later."

Bethancourt hung up slowly, wondering if he had been wrong about Katharine Poston. When she had walked into the study with the manuscript in hand, he had had no doubt that she had killed to get it. It had seemed quite clear, and he had been anxious to get home and attend to his personal affairs. But now it appeared that he had been hasty. The case did not seem to be over after all.

After a little more thought, he pulled out the London directory and dialed Laura Poston's number.

She remembered him without much prompting.

"You were the blond," she said languidly.

"Yes," agreed Bethancourt, "I was the blond. I still am. I know it's short notice, but I was wondering if you'd care to come and have a drink with me?"

"Now?" she asked.

"If it's convenient," he replied. "If not, perhaps we could make it for later this evening."

"Now's all right," she said. "Where?"

"Would Oenophilia's do?" asked Bethancourt, naming a chic and very popular wine bar.

"Oenophilia's would be lovely," she said. "I'll meet you there in half an hour."

"I've been thinking over what Spencer said last night," said Marla as she strolled down the street with her friend Christine Benton, another prominent model.

"What was that?" asked Christine. "Lord," she added, "it's hot tonight."

"He thought I should try the sweetness and light approach," explained Marla. "Try to be all affectionate and understanding."

"You?" said Christine.

"I'm thinking of trying it," Marla went on.

"Phillip gave you a beautiful pendant the last time you made up," said Christine irrelevantly.

"Jewelry, Christine, is not the point."

"I'm sorry, Marla," she said.

"I'll be better when we get out of this heat. Look, here we are," she added, swinging open the door of Oenophilia's and slip-

ping inside. "Air-conditioned bliss. Where do you want to sit? There's a table—Marla, are you all right?"

Marla had frozen just inside the doorway and was staring rigidly across the room, the color rising to her cheeks.

"That's Phillip," she said, stiffly, her green eyes snapping.

Christine looked and saw Bethancourt seated at a table with a willowy blonde who was leaning flirtatiously across the table towards him.

"Her hair's dyed," she began, then she realized her friend had disappeared. Sighing, she turned and went back out into the heat.

Gibbons sighed and sipped his cooling coffee. They had been questioning Mrs. Poston for some time but had got nothing out of her beyond her original story. She had demanded her solicitor, who had eventually been tracked down and who had, upon arriving, asked for a private interview with his client. The interview had now been going on for almost forty-five minutes, and Gibbons had no doubt that when it was over, they would be forced to release Mrs. Poston without learning anything at all.

Carmichael stuck his head in the door. "It's time, lad," he

said. "The solicitor has asked for us."

The atmosphere in the interview room was stale, and Katharine Poston looked weary. Her solicitor was grave.

"I have persuaded Mrs. Poston," he began, "to give you a fuller account of her movements." Both detectives brightened. "It is true that she has been holding something back, but I have convinced her that the police in the course of an investigation are accustomed to uncovering many secrets that have no bearing on the case and that are always kept confidential. I hope, superintendent, you will support me in that statement."

"Certainly," said Carmichael, although he had found the last part of the solicitor's speech less than encouraging. "If what Mrs. Poston has to tell us has no relevance, she may rest assured that it will never leave this room."

The solicitor turned to his client, who sighed.

"I suppose I have been rather foolish," she said. "Very well, superintendent, you were right. I was worried about something James might have written about me. You see, twenty-five or thirty years ago, James and I had a brief affair. My husband and I were having a difficult time and, well,

there's no point in going into all of that. The affair was never serious, and in fact I think it ended by doing us both good. We remained close friends, and our spouses never knew."

"But, Mrs. Poston," said Carmichael, "if Mr. Wilkinson was such a good friend, surely you had no reason to believe that he would mention the affair in his memoirs."

"It never occurred to me in the beginning," she answered. "But since his wife died, he has mentioned the affair once or twice—we had not spoken of it in years—and once even made a reference to it when my husband was with us. Oh, nothing overt, but you can see how I became concerned. Not so long ago, when we were talking about his writing, he announced that it would be the unvarnished story of his life. That rather alarmed me. Later I asked him point-blank if he meant to put our affair in his book, but he only grinned and said that his memoirs would surprise me. I think you will agree it was not a reassuring answer."

"Certainly not," said Carmichael. "But if you were so concerned, why did you not sneak a look at the manuscript? After all, you had the keys to the flat."

"Because I couldn't believe that he really meant to do it," she answered. "We had all been such good friends for so long, I didn't think he would hurt us like that. But then it suddenly occurred to me that he might think he could use the affair after all if he changed my name and the venue. That might have been all right, of course, but it equally well could have been the kind of thing anyone could see through. Then at the party that night, while the contessa was telling us about some married friends of hers who had had an affair, James looked over and winked at me. Fortunately, my husband was not looking his way, but I made up my mind then to tackle James about it."

"So you sought him out in the study?" asked Carmichael.

"Yes, but I wasn't thinking of bringing up the subject that night. I did go into the study to see if he was ready to join us." She paused. "It was just as I told you, superintendent. He was already dead. I just stood there. I thought that I should tell somebody, but I couldn't move. And then I remembered the manuscript. I can't think why it came into my mind then. So I took it from the drawer and put it in the shopping bag I had brought to take away the bowls and things I had lent Clare."

"Where was the shopping bag?" asked Carmichael.

"In the hall," she answered. "By the hall stand. Then I went back to the living room, meaning to tell Grant. But he was busy chatting, and somehow I didn't. I expect I was in shock. I just sat there, drinking my coffee until Clare said she would go and call James. I couldn't let her do that, of course, so I said I would go."

"I see," said Carmichael slowly. "Now, Mrs. Poston . . ."

Gibbons did not hear the rest of his question. Another detective had opened the door and was beckoning to him. Quietly, he rose and went out.

"What is it, Dan?" he asked.

"We've found something at the back of that manuscript," the detective answered. "I think you ought to see it."

The sun was setting by the time Bethancourt made his way home, stopping at an Indian take-away on his way. He had avoided taking Laura Poston on to dinner, although she had clearly wanted him to. He had felt that it would be a waste of time. In the two hours he had spent with her, he had learned nothing he did not already know. If her mother had been concerned about Wilkinson's memoirs, Laura had never noticed it. Neither had

she been aware of any undercurrents in the conversation during the party; Bethancourt doubted if she even knew what an undercurrent was, and she was worse than useless as a source of gossip about her elders. Moreover, she apparently had no interest in discussing the case, at least not with him.

Bethancourt stowed the Indian food in the oven and took Cerberus for a short walk. When he returned, he noticed the red light on his answering machine blinking furiously and switched it on. He hoped Gibbons had more to report than he had.

But it was Marla's voice that came over the speaker, coldly furious. Bethancourt was surprised that she was still so angry; usually twenty-four hours served to cool her temper considerably. He was even more astounded a minute later to be accused of infidelity. He understood that she was angry with him for breaking a date to go detecting, but how she had come to the conclusion that detecting had been a screen for infidelity was beyond him. The more so since it was not true.

She was now comparing him to a flea on a rat; the sort of flea, moreover, that had spread the bubonic plague across Europe. It was lucky for her that she had realized his perversity

before she had forgiven him. In fact, she was disgusted that she had even thought of forgiving him at all.

Bethancourt frowned. That made no sense. If she had been on the point of forgiving him, why should she . . .

"Oh, damn!" he said aloud. Cerberus, startled, looked up at him. "She must have seen me in the wine bar. Cerberus, old boy, we are really in trouble this time."

Switching off the machine, he sat down to concoct an appropriate lie. No sooner had he done so, however, when the phone rang. He hesitated and then decided to answer it and make up something on the spur of the moment. It might be his last chance to actually speak to Marla.

"Phillip?" said Gibbons. "We've had to let Mrs. Poston go. She did finally tell us something more, and Carmichael believes her. So do I, at least for the moment."

"What did she say?" asked Bethancourt.

Gibbons repeated what they had learned from Mrs. Poston. "But, Phillip," he added, "that's not all. The manuscript."

"What about it?"

"We found a half-finished letter in Wilkinson's handwriting at the back of it. I wish Mrs. Poston had mentioned it, but it

didn't make any impression on her. It's dated the day of the party."

"Jack," Bethancourt interrupted, "are you going to tell me what was in it or not?"

"Of course I am," replied Gibbons. "It says, 'Dear Martin, I have the painful task of warning you against someone we are both fond of, perhaps I more so than you. I was hoping there was some mistake . . . ' That's all."

"Martin being Martin Gledhill?" said Bethancourt.

"We think so," replied Gibbons. "There's no other Martin in his address book."

"But why would he be writing to Gledhill when he knew he was going to see him that night?"

"I don't know," said Gibbons. "Why didn't he finish it?"

"Perhaps he changed his mind and decided to telephone," said Bethancourt. "Have you spoken to Gledhill yet?"

"No," said Gibbons regretfully. "We've had to give that up for tonight. Carmichael rang, but he'd gone out to some charity dinner and isn't expected back till late. We're going around first thing in the morning. But, Phillip, don't you see this lets out both Gledhill and Mrs. Poston? And

they were the two who had the best opportunity."

"It doesn't let out Gledhill," objected Bethancourt. "He might not have needed warning. Supposing he was involved in some shady deal with one of the others and Wilkinson found out about it. He naturally assumes his good friend Gledhill is pure as the driven snow, and wants to warn him off. He can't get him alone at the party, so he goes off to write a note to give to him, when Gledhill comes in. 'Martin,' he says, 'I was just writing to warn you off so-and-so.' And Gledhill says, 'I know all about it, never mind.' And Wilkinson says, 'I don't think I can let you do that.' So Gledhill kills him. How's that?"

"You're very creative, Phillip," said Gibbons doubtfully, "but I think we ought to start taking a closer look at Laura Poston. She spent nearly half an hour with him, after all—plenty of time for an argument and a quick stab. And she's really almost too vague to be true; that could all be an act."

"Possibly," said Bethancourt, "but what's her motive? What could she possibly be doing that Gledhill would need to be warned about?"

"Something we haven't found out yet, of course," said Gibbons.

"Oh, that's terribly helpful," said Bethancourt sarcastically. "Look, do you want to come round and discuss it?"

"No," said Gibbons, "I want to go to bed. I'm worn out, Phillip, and we're starting early tomorrow. I thought you would be making up to Marla tonight, anyway."

"No such luck," answered Bethancourt. "She's really furious this time. In fact," he added, reminded of the activity the call had interrupted, "I should ring off and make another attempt to patch things up."

"All right," said Gibbons. "I'll ring you tomorrow as soon as we've seen Gledhill. He could hand us the answer to this whole thing on a platter. Goodnight, Phillip."

"Goodnight."

The Indian food was quite dried out by the time Bethancourt recollected it. He ate it anyway while he waited for Marla to ring him back. He had left a message on her machine designed to achieve this result; the explanations included in it were so incoherent that curiosity would force her to ring in, if only to find out what he was talking about. After he had eaten, he poured himself a drink and let his thoughts drift over the case. He was tired, but knew that if he went to bed, Marla would be sure to ring

just as he had gotten to sleep. He wondered if he had just spent the evening drinking in a fashionable wine bar with a murderess. It made a lovely story, but somehow he did not think it was true. Laura Poston struck him as being exactly what she seemed: a very vague and muddle-headed woman. He thought about what she had said of the party: she had begun to clear the table after dinner, had stopped to take in a brandy to Wilkinson, and had chatted with him about some unspecified subject. She had left the study at nine thirty, briefly meeting Willie Bradford in the hall, and had returned to the kitchen where she had done the dishes while Clare Gooden set out the coffee things. She was not sure whether Clare had left the room. They had taken the coffee into the living room, and she had stayed there.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. He could not imagine how the glaring inconsistency in her story had escaped him. She simply could not have done what she said she had. He reached for the phone to ring Gibbons.

“**Y**ou were right, Phillip,” said Gibbons, sinking gratefully into an easy chair and ac-

cepting the drink his friend handed him. It was the evening of the following day, a day in which Gibbons had been extremely busy. “He denied it all at first, but after Carmichael had detailed the evidence, he broke down and admitted it. I think in a way he really regrets the murder. How did you come to think of it?”

“I told you last night,” said Bethancourt, lighting a cigarette. “Laura Poston said she had left the study at nine thirty and had cleaned up the dinner dishes before taking in the coffee. Mrs. Gooden said she had, too. But everyone agreed that the coffee had arrived no later than nine thirty-five. It is just not possible, in five minutes, to rinse all the dishes from a dinner for ten and load them into the dishwasher. But if Laura had killed him, it would do her no good at all to put the time up to nine thirty. It wouldn’t give her an alibi. It *would* give Bradford one. And then I thought of the contessa. A very wealthy woman, and reputed to be very careful with her money. If Bradford was broke—what did you find out about that?”

“Absolutely stony,” confirmed Gibbons. “Actually, Carmichael had already found that out when he did his background checks. That art gallery of his is mortgaged up to the

hilt. And when I went through Wilkinson's checkbook from last year, I found a check for six thousand pounds made out to Bradford. He had never repaid it."

"And he was trying to borrow more from Gledhill?"

"That's right. Gledhill mentioned it to Wilkinson. Wilkinson didn't say anything right off because he couldn't believe Bradford would do anything like that. Bradford admits that Wilkinson asked him into the study after dinner to discuss it. Bradford was completely nonplussed, but he had the wits to tell Wilkinson the truth: that the contessa thought he was wealthy, and if she found out he wasn't, she wouldn't have anything more to do with him, much less marry him. Wilkinson was sympathetic, but he wasn't about to let Bradford borrow money from Gledhill on top of what he already owed. He had just made that clear when Laura came in with the brandy. Bradford was in a panic. He was terrified that Wilkinson would spill the beans right then and there in front of the contessa. And then he thought that if Wilkinson was dead he wouldn't have to worry."

"I suppose he realized at once that he could tell Laura it was midnight and she wouldn't notice."

Gibbons nodded. "That's right. He went into the living room and joined Gledhill and Gooden who were chatting by the door. From there, he could keep an eye on the hallway and catch Laura as she passed. In fact, he heard her say something to Wilkinson when she opened the study door and managed to nip out and catch her just as she was coming out. He told her the fairy tale about the time, and then went back into the study. He apologized to Wilkinson and gave him the dagger as his own gift. As soon as Wilkinson had opened it, he took it and killed him."

"He knew about the dagger, then?" asked Bethancourt.

"He'd actually seen it," answered Gibbons, "so he knew exactly how sharp it was. He bought that snuffbox at the same shop where Gledhill found the dagger, and even considered buying the dagger instead. He told Gledhill that when Gledhill rang him to say he'd found a sixteenth century bodkin to give Wilkinson." He sipped his drink. "Bradford's plan was really rather clever, when you consider he only had about five minutes to work it out in."

"True," said Bethancourt thoughtfully. "Did Bradford say whether Wilkinson was writing when he came in?"

"Oh yes," said Gibbons. "Wilkinson told him he was just making some notes for his memoirs, and put it away when Bradford came in, but really he must have been starting that letter to Gledhill."

"And since he was pretending it was part of his memoirs, he slipped it into the manuscript drawer." Bethancourt nodded and smoked in silence for a moment. "I wonder if he was really in love with the contessa, or whether it was just her money."

"Oh no," Gibbons shook his head. "He's in love with her right enough. You should have heard him on the subject. It was really rather pitiful. It was really the fear of losing her that put him in such a panic. Actually, it's what got him in trouble in the first place. He was doing all right financially until he met her and started trying to impress her."

Bethancourt nodded. "That's right," he said. "I'd forgotten what Mrs. Poston told us, about how upset he was over his wife's death. That fits in, too. It's really rather sad."

Gibbons shrugged. "Speaking of love," he said, "how's Marla?"

"Not good." Bethancourt sighed and stubbed out his cigarette. "She never rang me back last night, and I really

thought she would. I sent her roses round today, but there's been no response to that, either. I'm afraid she truly *has* left me this time. However, unlike Mr. Bradford, I think I can cope. Do you know, Jack, when I first thought of him last night, it all seemed so obvious. He first said he hadn't known about the dagger, and only admitted it after Gledhill told us he knew. It was really he who placed the time Laura left the study at nine thirty, and while he had an alibi after that, he hadn't one at all before it. I couldn't imagine why I hadn't realized it was him to begin with."

"Hindsight," began Gibbons sagely when the bell rang.

Bethancourt rose to answer it, but in another moment he raced back into the living room.

"It's Marla," he hissed. "Take your drink and go out the back way."

"But," said Gibbons, rising uncertainly, "I thought we were going to dinner to celebrate."

"Well, now we're not," retorted Bethancourt. "Hurry up and go away."

He sped back into the hallway, pausing only momentarily to fix an appropriate depressed expression on his face. Then he threw open the door.

"Marla!" he exclaimed in great astonishment. Then, before she could protest, he stepped forward and swept her into his arms.

"Thank God you've come back to me," he continued in between raining kisses on her head. "Marla, you are too wonderful. If I were a religious man, I swear I would fall on my knees and thank God for bringing you back to me. I was lost without you, utterly lost."

"Phillip," she said tartly, "I came here for an explanation."

"Certainly, my love," he said, his lips buried in her hair. "Whatever you want. I promise to do anything you like."

Her body, which had stiffened as he embraced her, slowly relaxed against him, and her arms crept around his neck.

"Oh well," she said, "I don't suppose any explanation of yours would be comprehensible anyhow."

"Thank you, Marla," he said, and kissed her.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Dave, Jr., is the racketeer in Toledo.

RESIDING IN	BROTHER	SON	BUSINESS
San Francisco	Cal	Bert, Jr.	brickyard
Denver	Dave	Cal, Jr.	electrical
Chicago	Bert	Art, Jr.	hardware
Toledo	Art	Dave, Jr.	racketeer

Cal is the tallest brother. His son won the golf championship. Bert, Jr., and Cal, Jr., moved into apartments.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

What a grind, Pete Street is thinking as he checks off passengers boarding his bus with its six rows of two seats each for the tour through Gorgeous Gorge National Park. Every day is the same: point out Mount Stout, scare their pants off about the fatal phantom of Dannon Canyon. He notes that one of the male passengers on this trip is named Larry and one of the ladies is named Beatrice. One couple comes from Utah.

The last pair, the Parkers, settle into their seats. Pete eases behind the wheel and closes the bus door. They are off to see what the brochure describes as "breathtaking marvels of Nature."

(1) Angela is sitting in the row behind John and in the one ahead of Mr. and Mrs. Newman. (Each couple sits together.) They are from Tennessee, Virginia, and Texas (not necessarily in that order).

(2) George sits in the row behind Florence's husband and in the one ahead of Mr. O'Dell. These three men include the executive (who is not from South Carolina), the banker, and the doctor.

(3) The woman from Texas is in the row behind Ellen and in the row ahead of the farmer's wife.

(4) Henry, Isaac, and John include Celia's husband, the carpenter, and the man from Virginia.

(5) The woman from South Carolina sits in the row behind Isaac's wife and in the row ahead of Della.

(6) The McCoy, O'Dell, and Queen couples include Karl, the architect, and the gentleman from West Virginia.

(7) Mr. McCoy is seated in the row behind Henry and in the one ahead of the man from Tennessee.

(8) The doctor is in the row behind Mr. Queen and in the one ahead of Mr. Robinson.

As Pete is directing their attention to Satan's Slide, he glances into his rear view mirror just in time to see the woman in the last row lean forward and inject a hypodermic into the man just in front of her. The latter slumps forward in his seat.

Pete Street immediately whips the bus into a U-turn and heads for the park rangers' station. This is *not* his usual boring tour.

Who killed whom?

FICTION

Murray and Mister Smart Nose

by William T.
Lowe

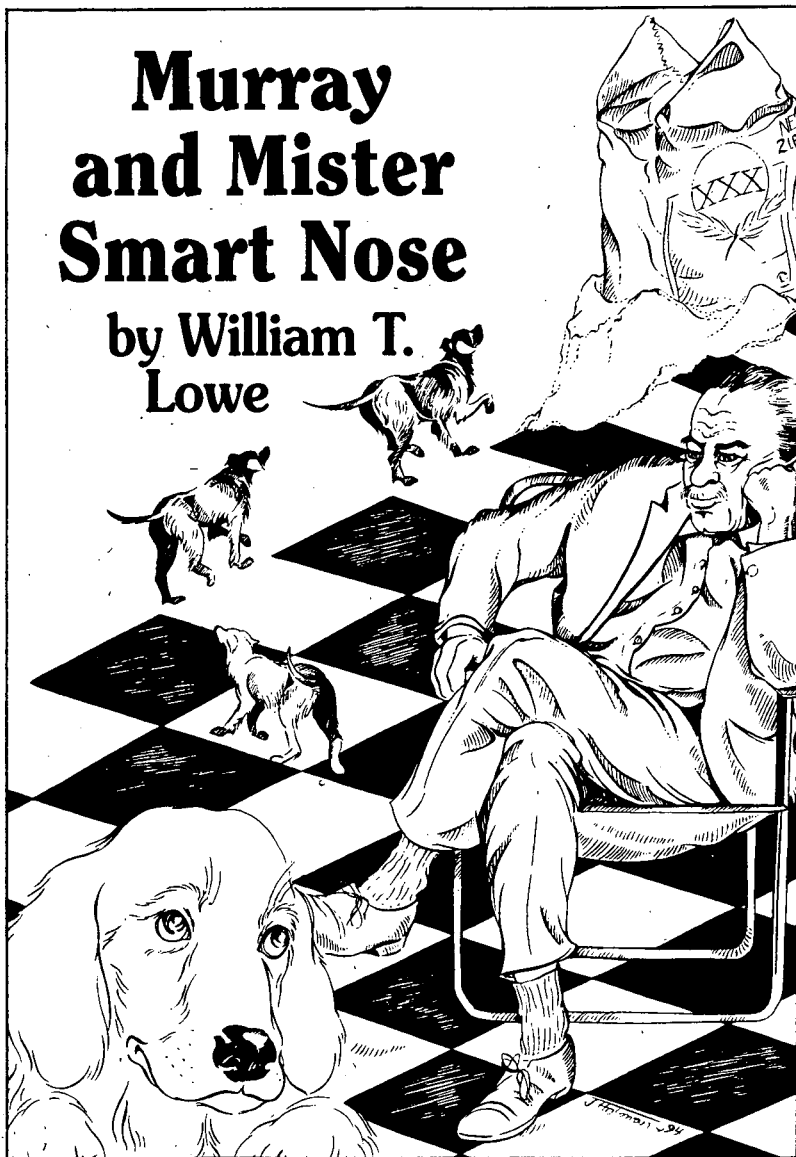


Illustration by Judith Holman

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“He just got lucky,” Murray said. “You’d have to take that car apart to find that stuff where I hid it.”

“No, Murray, he’s had special training.”

“Training, spaining! He got lucky again, I tell you!”

“It’s progress, Murray,” I said as soothingly as I could. “It’s new technology.”

“This is technology? Four feet and a cold nose is technology? Give me a break, Irving!”

I deliberately changed the subject. “Anna wants you to retire, Murray. Why put it off? Go to Florida. Take a condo.”

“And live next door to that idiot son-in-law of mine?”

“You don’t have to live in West Palm, Murray. I hear Lauderdale is nice.”

“I wouldn’t live in the same state as that bum.”

I shut up. There was no use talking to him when he was in that frame of mind. And especially now that his pride had been hurt. A dog named Bingo was ruining his business.

Murray and I were connected with the smuggling trade. He hid things, such as packages of narcotics or currency, and I changed things, such as the identification numbers on stolen cars.

We operated near one of the busiest borders in the country,

the border between the United States and Canada at the top of New York. Up there the smuggling never stops; just ask the Border Patrol in Champlain or Rouses Point.

Murray had a machine shop next door to my garage and used car lot. That made it nice because strange cars could come and go without attracting local attention. We were on Route Nine less than two hours below the border. You might say we had a ringside seat.

The illegal traffic is heavy. Cocaine comes north from Florida on its way to Canada. Heroin comes into Canada from places like Ghana and moves south into the States. Firearms, all kinds, move both ways. A big volume item is tobacco. It goes into Canada by the ton because most of the cigarettes exported from Canada are smuggled right back in.

And people, illegal aliens from Europe and the Far East trying to evade our Immigration and Naturalization Service. And cash, millions of dollars of it. Annually? Try monthly.

Anyway, let’s say you’ve got a few pounds of cocaine you want to take to market in Canada without interference from Canadian Customs. You could do what the amateurs do and hide the stuff in your spare tire,

or shove it in the bottom of a golf bag, or sew it up in a stuffed elephant.

Or you could go to Murray. He was a concealment specialist, known to be an expert at hiding small packages in automobiles that were to be driven past customs inspectors. Whenever he put your merchandise, in a false door in the trunk, in the back of the seat, in place of the speakers, every joint, every seam would look like the factory original.

"There's no respect for workmanship any more," Murray griped. "What's the world coming to?"

That was the problem. Murray's work was picture perfect, but now appearances weren't enough. Canadian Customs had brought in a sniffer dog, a dog trained to locate marijuana and cocaine by smell. Bingo looked like a black Lab, but actually he was a Belgian shepherd, very intelligent and with the keenest nose in dogdom. (In case you didn't know it, we've got sniffer dogs on our side, too.)

"This is man's best friend?" Murray snapped. "His fleas should have fleas already."

Bingo's educated sense of smell let the inspectors see through plastic or paneling or upholstery. One sniff and Murray's work was rendered null

and void. "By a dog yet," Murray groaned. "The shame of it!"

How do you sympathize with someone who is a fossil, a has-been? "Retire, Murray," I would say.

"What are you, my father now?" he would say. He was stubborn; he wouldn't give up.

"I'm not finished with you yet, Mister Smart Nose!"

A man from New Jersey gave Murray his next opportunity. He had six "bricks" he wanted to transport into Canada, secretly, of course. He was in a hurry and kept looking over his shoulder.

Murray worked quickly. He found an old ice chest and put a false bottom in it with the packages underneath. Then he put in about five pounds of fish and some water but no ice.

By the time the car reached the border the chest and the trunk would reek of ripe fish. Murray threw in a rod and a reel and saw the man on his way.

I had a contact on the other side of the border who told me what happened. The overripe fish did not sidetrack Bingo. Canadian Customs impounded the car and the cocaine and the man from New Jersey.

Another round to Bingo.

Murray was despondent, but a few days later he had another turn at bat. A man appeared in

his shop with a small case full of cocaine and a pocketful of cash. He had a Florida tan and a young lady with him.

Murray had an inspiration. He told the man to trade his car in on a camper that happened to be on my used car lot, and to come back in two days to pick it up.

"Now, Mister Smart Nose, we will see what we will see."

The next day I went into Murray's shop with a news flash. "Listen, Murray," I said, "the Mounties are taking Bingo on a demonstration tour next Thursday. He'll be part of a program to teach school kids about drugs. Send this guy and his coke across the border on Thursday, and you'll have nothing to worry about."

Murray's eyes lit up. "Right! We sneak by when Mister Smart Nose isn't looking!" Then he frowned. "No, Irv. Then I'll never know who can outsmart who, will I? Nope, I'll be ready for him on Wednesday."

So when the man from Florida came back with his girlfriend to pick up his camper, I gave him his title and then listened in while Murray was briefing them.

"You're man and wife," Murray said. "You're going camping near Toronto. Hang up your clothes in the closets, and put

your toothbrushes in the bathroom. Buy yourself some milk and fruit for the icebox. Understand?"

The couple nodded. We went inside, and Murray moved to the tiny kitchen area. He opened a cupboard door and pointed at the shelves. They held a few cans of soup and vegetables. Murray tapped on the back wall. "I put a new panel here," he said to the man, "your property is behind it."

Then Murray pointed at a small bag of flour and a rack of spices. "Now listen good. Before you get to the border, you pull over in a rest area and stop. You spill the flour and the spices all over the floor. Understand?"

The couple nodded again. "Don't worry; things get spilled in campers like this all the time."

Then Murray took a small bottle out of the spice rack. "Now, you be sure to open this bottle and pour it on the floor in front of this cupboard door."

He opened the bottle and held it under their noses. It was oil of peppermint; the pungent smell quickly filled the camper. Murray capped the bottle again. "This is to fool Mister Smart Nose," he said to me.

"So now," he said to the man with the Florida tan, "tomorrow's Wednesday. You stay in

Plattsburg tonight and cross at Champlain in the morning." He pointed at the flour and the spices. "Can you handle everything?"

The man grinned. "Piece of cake." He took out a roll of bills and paid Murray his fee. Then the couple got in the camper and drove away.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Murray, you're a regular Cecil DeMille. You should get an Academy Award." I knew how hard he had worked; I wanted to make him feel good.

Murray smiled. "Now we'll see what's what."

Wednesday morning we waited, Murray in his little shop and me in my garage. I figured the man with the Florida tan should hit Champlain about midmorning. It was a pretty day, and I knew traffic at the border would be heavy both ways. I didn't think the man and his girlfriend would do anything to attract attention to themselves, but border inspectors are smart. In an eight hour shift they can see as many as four thousand cars. They develop certain instincts about people and their reactions to questions.

"Anything yet, Irv?" It was Murray at my door.

"Not yet, Murray. Go back to your own place."

I was worried about him. The stubborn old fool was about to give himself a heart attack over what he thought of as a personal problem. And he wouldn't listen to me.

Like I said, I had a contact on the Canadian side. I had described the camper to him, and I was waiting for his call. I got it just before noon. The camper went through.

I walked over to Murray's shop. He saw me coming and had the door open, so nervous he couldn't stand still.

"The camper got past customs," I told him. "There was a line of cars, and they had to wait. Then one of the agents came and asked them the usual questions and stuck his head inside the camper and looked around. Then they waited some more, and then the inspectors waved them on through."

"Good!" Murray was delighted. "Was Mister Smart Nose there?"

"Yes, he was there. His handler took him in the camper for a few minutes, but they came right back out." Murray was nodding and grinning.

"So the guy from Florida is on his way to Montreal with his coke," I said. "You happy now?"

Murray rubbed his hands together. "Yes, Irv, I am. So I finally fooled Mister Smart Nose."

He looked around his little shop and sighed. "You know, Irv, you may be right. It is time to quit. I think I'll try Daytona."

And he did. Two days later Murray and his wife Anna had their car packed and the house in the hands of a realtor.

"Goodbye, Irv. Come see us."

"Goodbye, Murray. Stay healthy."

I knew he'd be happy down there. I'd miss him, but his kind of talent was obsolete now. Not just because of dogs like Bingo. There's a lot of high tech stuff like sonic imaging and magnetic X-rays for detecting stuff these days. Murray would always be a real craftsman; maybe he would build himself a boat down there in Florida.

There's no reason he should ever know what really happened that Wednesday morning at the border.

Yes, Bingo did smell out the cocaine in spite of the peppermint and the bay leaf and the oregano. But the agents decided to leave it where it was

and let the camper go on through. They had a good reason.

The setup in the camper was just too elaborate, too professional. It suggested to the inspectors that the contraband hidden in the trailer must be very valuable stuff. Also that the man driving the camper might have some very interesting business associates somewhere in Canada. People the police would like to meet.

So they let the camper drive on, and a plainclothes detail picked it up and followed it, all the way to a house in a suburban area of Montreal. And a day or two later the police hauled in a big narcotics distribution ring.

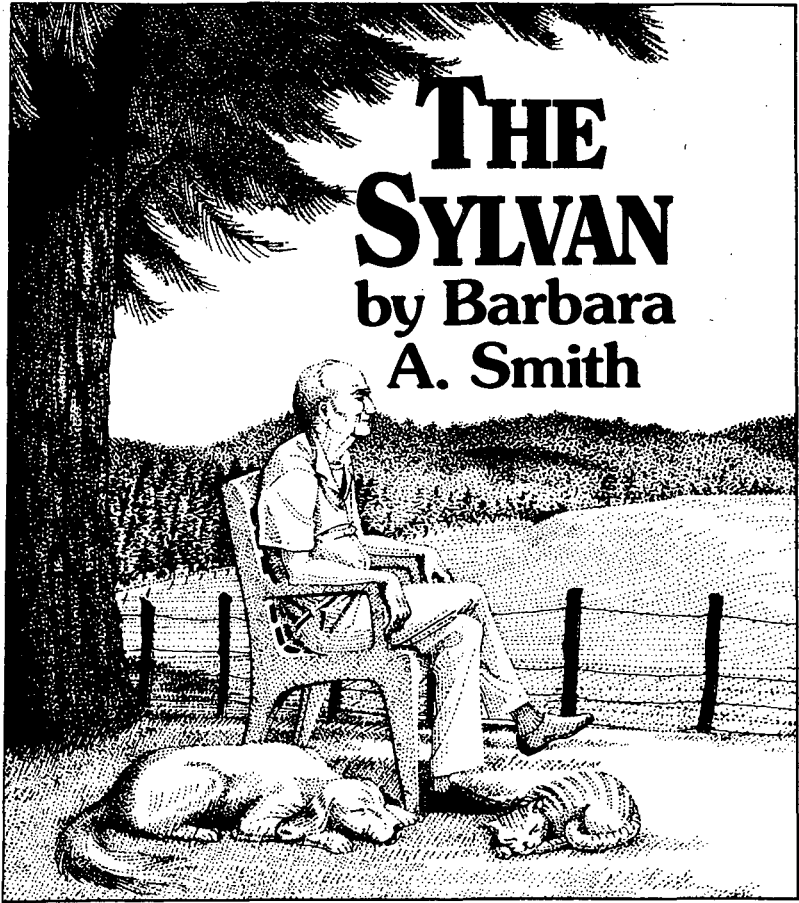
But I didn't lie to Murray. The camper did go through just as I said it did. Later on I told Murray that I heard the man with the Florida tan was in jail.

"Good," Murray said. "He should grow old and have bad teeth."

Then he told me the man had paid him with counterfeit one hundred dollar bills.

THE SYLVAN

by Barbara
A. Smith



“Son of a bitch,” the old man grumbled.

From the hilltop, eighty-two-year-old Ben Cross watched Frank Tuggle shovel garbage from the back of his gray Dodge pickup onto the flames. The

bonfire belched a thick black cloud that reeked of melted plastic. In addition to the smoke, a stout breeze carried ashes and partially burned bits of trash across the property line, dusting his fields, his house, his wash.

In the forty years he'd known him, Ben Cross had never found anything to like about Frank Tuggle, or his late father before him. Neither of them had ever had an ounce of respect for their neighbors.

Ben Cross wasn't brought up that way. His own father taught him that people needed to get along with their neighbors: they were an extension of your family. A person helped his neighbors, looked out for them. That's the way it was in rural communities like Oak Crossing, except for old Mose Tuggle and his son Frank.

Ben began the long walk back to the house accompanied by Ol' Boot, his black and white collie-mix. The dog routinely trotted ahead, then stopped, waiting until the old man caught up.

It probably wasn't a burning day, but it wouldn't do any good to call downtown. Officer Billy Ramirez would drive out and tell Tuggle to stop burning, maybe even write him a ticket. It wouldn't do any good, though. It never did. Frank Tuggle did just what he wanted, when he wanted. He either didn't know any better or just didn't care.

Ben would take his wash off his clothesline and hang it inside the back porch, *if* he was

in time. Otherwise, he'd end up washing everything over.

"Damn fool," he grumbled again.

"Take it easy, Ben," his wife Evie used to say. "There's no point in getting yourself all worked up over something you can't change. That Frank Tuggle's gonna die mean." She was right, too, God rest her soul. Even though eleven years had passed since he'd heard her say it, her words still sounded as clear as the Thursday night volunteer fire siren.

Tuggle didn't come to her funeral. Forty years a neighbor and the man never even paid his respects. The rest of the town came, though. In fact, they had to put folding chairs in the aisles just so all the people could sit down. Ben suspected there'd be no one at Tuggle's funeral except Frank himself.

Ben struggled along the dirt path, his arthritic legs protesting the eighth of a mile walk. He stopped once to rest, kicking at a bull thistle, still cursing the black smoke that blemished the sky's previously clear blue complexion. Even the Douglas firs bordering the lane, their thick limbs wavering in the breeze, appeared intent on fanning the offensive smoke back toward Tuggle's barren land.

Trees had once covered Frank Tuggle's property, too—hundreds of them. At first, Frank and Mose harvested only as much wood as they could cut and split themselves, selling off a cord or two a week from grocery store parking lots. Eventually they sold their timber rights to a plywood mill in Coos Bay, which immediately clear-cut the entire twenty acres.

Since then, Ben had hated even to look next door. It used to be a beautiful place, much like his own, covered in hundred-year-old fir, sprinkled with alder, cedar, a little bit of oak. Years ago Ben had cleared several acres of his own land for hay and pasture, but he'd left most of the timber standing. He'd sold the cattle after Evie's death, but the trails they carved throughout the stand of second-growth fir still remained, traveled now by raccoon, fox, deer, and an occasional Roosevelt elk.

Ben took pride in his land, which was for the most part untouched. And he was proudest of the Sylvan—that's what Evie had named the big fir. The solitary old-growth reached more than two hundred feet into the sky. Separated from the grove by several acres of pasture, the Sylvan stood fifty yards behind the house, bordering the property line. Her thick

limbs dangled across a split-rail fence dividing Ben's land from Tuggle's. On Tuggle's side a dirt lane paralleled the fence, leading to his ramshackle house another one hundred fifty feet back.

Evie's cousin Rose had once used the word "sylvan," referring to the grove of trees covering the hill out back. Evie didn't understand the word's meaning, but she promptly looked it up once Rose left. Daniel Webster defined sylvan as "one who lived in the woods," from a French word meaning forest god. It was such a pretty word, and that one big fir was such a pretty tree. From then on she called it the Sylvan because she liked the sound of it and because she thought that if there was such a thing as a forest god it was surely that old Douglas fir.

Ben looked up into the stately tree as he passed, muttering, "Son of a bitch is burning again." Ben Cross didn't think anything of talking to himself, or to a dog, or even to a tree.

The smoke hadn't fouled his clothes yet, so the old man pulled an armful of checkered flannel shirts from the line and carried them inside. It was almost noon. Weeding the garden could wait until later when it

was cooler outside and not so smoky.

The two bedroom farmhouse was quiet now, so quiet that even an old man could hear the cuckoo clock measuring off the seconds. There had been a time when the small front room seemed crowded and full of sounds—Evie and Dennis, Dennis's classmates from school, friends, neighbors, even the animals. The Crosses always had animals. Now there were just Ol' Boot and Cinnamon, the big orange tom. They were both getting along in years and usually joined Ben in his naps, Ol' Boot behind the chair and Cinnamon on the multistriped green afghan.

He heated some soup, then watched the news. Afterward he fell asleep in his chair.

Ben woke at five o'clock. Lately, the naps lasted longer, and it was harder for him to get up and get moving. He opened the back door and squinted through the screen, his nostrils testing the air. A taint of smoke remained. He went to the refrigerator for his afternoon beer, which he drank every day about this time.

Ben hobbled out beneath the Sylvan, where he settled in his white resin chair facing the road. His eyesight was still good enough to recognize who drove by, and he usually knew

where they were headed, too. Dozens of tractors and hay trucks passed his farm this time of year. Some of the men driving the rigs honked, others waved. Officer Billy Ramirez drove past in his patrol car, as did Clyde Schlechter in his big maroon Cadillac.

The Sylvan lightly fanned the old man with her branches, rustling a pretty song in the breeze. Ben heard a door bang at Frank Tuggle's, and a minute later he heard an engine groan, then sputter.

Tuggle floored the gas pedal until the V-8 coughed, then roared. As soon as he could keep the engine running, the gray Dodge pickup bounced down the lane, fighting its way through the ruts and chuckholes. The road hadn't been oiled or graveled in years.

Tuggle bounced past Ben doing nearly thirty-five miles an hour, blanketing the old man with dust. Ben covered his nose and mouth with a red bandanna and cursed him.

Every night around this time, Tuggle drove into Oak Crossing. He frequented a bar in town called Good Time Pattie's, which every other Wednesday night featured topless dancers. The word around town was, you could get more than an eyeful if you had the cash.

Ben waved most of the dust away with his handkerchief, taking a swallow of beer to wash down the rest. The Sylvan's branches seemed to bristle in anger, although it was most likely a breeze from the west that jostled the bluegreen needles. Ben remembered one particular Fourth of July—hotter than a jalapeño that year as he recalled. Evie had set up the card table under the Sylvan, covering it with her best white linen tablecloth and grocery store china. She made half a dozen trips carrying the food from the house—fried chicken, corn on the cob, sliced tomatoes, fresh cucumber salad. Dennis had a package of sparklers, and even though it wasn't dark outside, he'd stick them in the dirt and light three or four at the same time.

They'd all just filled their plates and sat down in the grass beneath the Sylvan when Frank Tuggle decided to join the party. He'd been watching them from his front porch, and apparently, their laughter annoyed him. He started his John Deere tractor and proceeded to plow the dry dirt bordering the lane, floating a gigantic dust cloud over the three picnickers. Evie covered what she could and ran crying into the house. Ben was still remembering

when Officer Billy Ramirez's patrol car turned in the lane.

The old man raised his beer can in the air and smiled. Ol' Boot raced up to the house to greet Billy and escort him to the Sylvan.

"How's it going, Ben?" Billy shouted.

"Still kicking. How about you, young fella?"

"Real good," he called, grinning.

Ben watched Billy as he walked back to the Sylvan. He was a small man, as Mexicans tend to be, five feet eight inches tall at the most. His solid shoulders narrowed into a slim waist and hips, and he carried himself with a brisk, authoritative gait. He'd probably wind up a skinny, wiry old man, just like Ben Cross, given another fifty years.

"You ain't here to arrest me for harassing ol' Tuggle, are you?"

Billy laughed and shook his head.

"He was burning again today." Ben grimaced. "Wish he'd just burn the whole damn place down and be done with it."

"I saw it." Billy settled to one knee on the dry grass, finger-combing his tar-black hair. "I figured it was him. You want me to go talk to him?"

"Oh, hell no! Won't do a damn bit of good. Besides, he

barreled out of here about twenty minutes ago. Probably down at Pattie's getting his peek."

"That's tomorrow night." Billy laughed again and stood. "Your garden's looking real good."

The two men strolled along the garden's edge, admiring the green peppers, acorn squash, and giant tangerine-colored marigolds; there was a little bit of everything in Ben Cross's garden. Each picked a ripe tomato, which they polished on the front of their shirts then ate while walking slowly back to the house.

They stopped at the patrol car, turning to look out over the garden again. Billy picked up a piece of slate and sailed it fifty or sixty feet over the garden and into the vacant pasture, showing off his first baseman's arm.

"Been playing summer league?"

"Undefeated in five games," Billy said, beaming. "You want to come to a game, Ben? Jenny and the kids'll come pick you up. The next one's on Thursday night."

The old man pushed his bottom lip forward and lifted his shoulders. "Maybe."

"Jenny'll pack a few snacks . . . sandwiches."

Ben's coarse laugh rattled. "You make it sound damn tempting."

"Think about it, okay? Jenny or I'll give you a call. Of course, this isn't exactly a free ride. You'll have to help watch the kids."

"Amy and Shelly? That's reason enough to go right there. How are my little girlfriends, anyway?"

"Oh, they're a couple of characters, that's for sure." Billy circled the open car door and slid onto the seat. "You take 'er easy now, Ben."

Ben stood watching until the patrol car reached the main road, then waved again as the horn sounded and Billy pulled out toward Oak Crossing. He had worked with Billy's dad for close to twenty years at McCormick's Dairy. Alberto "Al" Ramirez was what he considered a good Mexican. His six kids all graduated from high school and turned out good people, good neighbors. A few years before Ben retired, Al got his youngest son a job at the dairy. Ben still saw that same skinny Mexican kid with the big white smile every time he looked at Officer Billy Ramirez.

A Saturday night seldom passed without the police making a stop at Good Time Pattie's. Fights mostly. The place

was known for its rough clientele of regulars, Frank Tuggle among them.

Frank Tuggle hated everyone and everything and made no bones about it. He'd argue any subject—politics, sports, religion—just for the sake of arguing. It got to the point that most people ignored him, same as with his dad, Mose.

The thick smoke in Pattie's did help to camouflage the smell. Frank Tuggle seldom washed his clothes, nor did he bathe regularly. He was a thin man; tall and stringy thin, his knotted physique the result of a lifetime of liquor and tobacco. His breath reeked of decayed teeth that had never known a toothbrush, much less a dentist. A person had to be in dire need of a free drink to sit next to him.

"Shoot 'em all, sons of bitches, that's what I say."

"Who's that, Frank?" Kelly the bartender mumbled, somewhat uninterested.

"Faggots wanting rights," he said with a snarl, pointing to the six o'clock news on the television set above the bar. "Them sissy boys be wanting to marry sheep next, all legal like."

"Yeah, 'spose so," Kelly said, laughing, although he figured if anybody around these parts personally knew any sheep, it'd be Tuggle. After all, Tuggle

was fifty-four years of age and never married, never even had a girlfriend. People could begin to wonder.

At least Tuggle put on a good show on Wednesday nights. He always sat right up front with a pile of five dollar bills, smoking Camel nonfilters, drinking Ten High whisky straight, one after another. He'd hoot and pucker his lips, making smooching noises at the dancers. The girls on the circuit all knew who he was, and most wouldn't go near him for less than a five, and some not at all. The other men all got by using one dollar bills.

Tuggle came in every night, had a few drinks and something to eat, then played pool or the video poker machines. He always flashed a wallet full of money. People said he got a bundle for the timber they logged off his property.

Tonight a young couple in their early twenties walked in and sat down next to the pool table. They weren't from Oak Crossing. Neither Kelly nor Tuggle recognized them. The boy ordered a pitcher of beer at the bar, put two quarters in the table, then selected a cue from the rack. No one had played in over an hour.

"Hey! That's my table," Tuggle yelled. "Gotta play me, or you don't play."

"How about if me and my girlfriend play one game, then you can have it back."

"That ain't the way it works here, sonny. That's my game." Tuggle hitched up his pants, temporarily covering the usual visible crack of his ass, and swaggered over. "Rack 'em."

The young man snapped the cue into the rack and shook his head. "You go right ahead, man. It's *your* table."

Tuggle racked the balls, slammed them into the pockets—swearing each time he missed a shot—then went back to his stool at the bar.

The next face that came through the door was a familiar one. Billy Ramirez usually walked through Pattie's every night. Everyone knew the officer, and most were friendly. Not Tuggle, though.

"Hey, José, you lost? Tijuana's in the other direction."

"Just making sure you're behaving yourself, Frank." Billy strolled the length of the bar. "I saw some smoke out your direction. Not doing any burning today, were you?"

"No sir," he said sarcastically, then laughed again. "Maybe it was that old idiot next door."

"Maybe. Next time, I'll have to drive out and take a look, I guess."

"You do that . . . officer." The word sounded dirty coming from Tuggle's mouth.

"I don't have to remind you there's a seventy-five dollar fine for burning without a permit. Of course, you already knew that, didn't you, Frank?"

Tuggle forced gusts of air through his nostrils in a taunting laughter, but kept his mouth shut. Billy rested his hands on his hips and glanced around the room, smiling politely at the young couple, nodding at the bartender.

"Be seeing you, Kelly."

Frank Tuggle was a far braver man once the door closed behind Officer Billy Ramirez.

"S'pose he leaves a grease spot on the seat?" he said, laughing hysterically.

It was almost ten when Frank Tuggle left the tavern. Whether it was the breeze that carried the message or the trees passing the word one to another, the stately Sylvan knew he was coming. The same as any living thing knows the goodness of a clear summer day, or of a gentle spring rain, they also recognized the evil inside Frank Tuggle. He was the like of fire and pestilence: his coming as distinctive as the void preceding a storm.

Hundreds of glowing yellow eyes watched from the cover of wild ferns and rhododendrons. The grass, the bushes, the leaves, all rustled in harmonious chorus with the wind.

"Do it . . ." they urged in a steady, breathy whisper. "Do it . . ."

When the Dodge turned into the lane, the surrounding countryside grew silent, almost cemetery-still.

The Sylvan's massive limb groaned from the effort. The first crack was small and sounded like a twig snapping. The pops and snaps became louder, closer together, like kindling crackling, ready to explode into flame. The big limb lurched up, then down, trying to hasten its fall. One final push and it snapped.

Whoomph! She hit him squarely across the windshield, bending the roof supports into the cab. If he'd been going any faster, it would have taken his head off. Frank Tuggle slammed to an abrupt stop with a limb measuring twelve inches in diameter less than a foot from his nose, a bloody, broken nose at that. A shroud of bluegreen needles covered the entire front end of the Dodge.

"Son of a bitch!" he screamed.

Tuggle spit blood and teeth onto the dashboard, and tried

to open the door. But the crash had jammed them both, and for the time being, he was a prisoner inside the blackened cab. The faintly lit instrument panel illuminated a solid wall of fir boughs crushed against a spider web of broken glass. He honked the horn for close to five minutes before Ben Cross's lights came on.

Ben called 911, got dressed, and went outside to see what all the commotion was about. Officer Bob Parker arrived at the same time and pried the pickup door open, freeing Tuggle. An off-duty Billy Ramirez drove out, too, thinking it might be Ben who needed help. From all the commotion Tuggle was causing, the other men doubted he was hurt badly; the truth was, they didn't exactly care, either.

"Have your seat belt on, Frank?" Bob Parker asked dryly.

"Don't need no goddamn seat belt to drive on your own property. Now, are you gonna arrest him or what?"

"Arrest who?" Billy asked.

"Why, him, of course," Tuggle shouted, stabbing his index finger toward Ben.

"What for?"

The laughter mingled in Billy's words infuriated Tuggle, who stepped closer to him than the officer preferred. Be-

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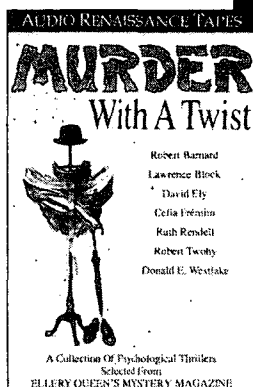
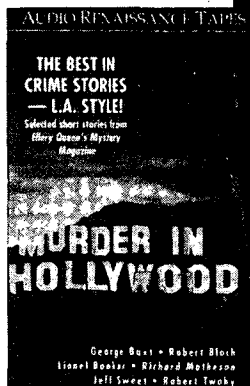
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sides his normal smell and appearance, the broken nose, bloody mouth, and missing teeth made Frank Tuggle about as appealing as a dose of ipecac.

"Negligence, that's what for. Negligence! Are you blind, or don't you see what's happened here? That's *his* tree that damn near killed me."

Billy stepped back, feeling his dinner rising in his throat, and turned his head away. "I'm sure that Ben has insurance to cover this, and if you want somebody to drive you into the emergency room, we'll be glad to take you. But nobody's going to jail. Unless, of course, your blood alcohol content shows you shouldn't have been driving, Frank."

Tuggle looked as though he'd just been hit by another tree.

"I'm on my own damn property, and a man can do what he wants on his own property. Now all of you can just get the hell out of here." He turned and started up the dirt lane, stumbling along in the darkness. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer, Cross," he shouted.

"Well, it looks like you boys got me," Ben said, gazing up into the Sylvan's branches. "Yep, it was me, climbed up there seventy feet and dropped that limb right on the damn fool."

The men all laughed, although they were careful not to let Tuggle hear them. Billy walked around the end of the branch and shone his flashlight up the tree trunk, then back along the fallen limb. The branches were motionless. There wasn't any wind.

"It doesn't look rotten." Billy pulled away a strip of the grayish-brown bark. "I don't see any bugs in there, either. What do you suppose happened?"

Ben shrugged. "It must have been a bad spot somewhere. I don't know. I suppose we'll see what it was in the morning."

Bob Parker wished them goodnight and walked back to his car, leaving Ben and Billy standing beneath the Sylvan.

"You know Tuggle's going to raise a real stink about this." Billy aimed his flashlight where the Dodge's windshield used to be. "Probably totaled out this old piece of junk of his."

"I feel a lot worse about the tree," Ben muttered as he started back to the house.

It was a matter of image. That was how Dennis and Teresa Cross felt about their BMW, a 325is model, sea green with tan leather interior, on-board computer, and a compact disc player. You couldn't count the nine hundred dollars a month as an-

other payment because they were just leasing the car and that was entirely different. If Dennis wanted to be successful selling these little beauties, he had to drive one.

Teresa liked to pull alongside vehicles that didn't have air conditioning. The people inside always looked so hot and miserable while she looked so, well ... good. Her makeup was flawless and her platinum blonde hair, which cost a lot of money to keep that way, stayed perfectly in place. Dennis always slouched in the seat, looking macho, but Teresa sat up prim and proper—making sure anyone looking in could see that she had a nice figure. There weren't many men on these back country roads to notice, but those who did were duly impressed.

"You're going to get the car all dirty going out there," she complained. "I'll have to spend two hours washing it when we get home."

"We won't stay long, honey." Dennis reached over and rubbed her thigh, sliding his thumb along the inside of her shorts. "Just long enough to do my duty, you know, the loving son routine. If he's in a good mood, maybe I'll ask him for a few bucks."

"Fat chance. It's never worked before, what makes you

think it'll be any different this time?"

"He can't take it with him, can he? He might as well give it to me."

"The dutiful son."

"That's me." Dennis grinned and patted her bare leg.

From his easy chair in the front room, Ben watched the little green car pull into the lane. It was the first time in three months they'd come to visit him.

Although he would never say it aloud, Ben was disappointed in the way his boy turned out. They had never been as close as a father and son should be, and now as the years passed, even more distance grew between them. He had always hoped Dennis would take an interest in the farm when he grew up, but he never had. Instead, his only son lived in a Portland waterfront condo that he couldn't afford, selling cars that no one else could afford either. Fancy cars and fancy women, that was Dennis Cross. Ben was almost relieved that Evie hadn't lived to see the woman he finally married. Between the perfume and the cigarettes, it took a week after each visit to get the smell of her out of his house.

Ben just stayed sitting. Dennis would open the back door

and holler, and he'd holler back. He still never locked his doors.

"Dad! So, how you doing? Long time no see."

Ben nodded and smiled, then shook his son's hand.

Teresa waltzed past on her way to the sofa. She mumbled something in the form of a greeting, without glancing over. Before she sat down, Teresa always examined the sofa for dog or cat hair and brushed it with her hand. And she didn't *sit*, she *lit*, kind of like a butterfly, perched just barely on the sofa's edge—back straight, chest thrown forward. Ben suspected most men thought her a goodlooking woman, although there was nothing unusual about her beauty. Most of it was painted on.

She grimaced at Cinnamon, who was curled on his afghan, and he glowered back, mirroring her disgust.

"So what's new?" Dennis helped himself to a beer from the refrigerator. "How about you, hon?"

"No, Dennis. Remember, we really can't stay long."

"Want a beer, Dad?" Dennis asked, almost as an afterthought.

"Sure, I'll take one."

Dennis handed the old man a beer and walked to the dining room window. The Sylvan's dis-

carded branch lay alongside the lane leading to Tuggle's house.

"What happened to the tree?"

"She dropped a limb right smack on Frank's Dodge," Ben said, chuckling, then struggled to his feet from the easy chair. "Yes, sir, you should have seen him, madder than hell and spitting teeth. We had the cops down and everything. Billy came down, too, asked ol' Frank if he wanted to go take a blood test." Ben laughed even louder.

"How is Billy boy?" As children, they'd attended the same schools, although Dennis, at thirty-seven, was two years older than Billy.

"Fine . . . fine. His girls are both growing like weeds. The oldest starts school this year."

"Frank hit the tree with his pickup?"

"No, no, looks like she just snapped. Must have been split from the wind or something. Probably been coming on for years."

"Shame to cut it down," Dennis said casually and walked away from the window.

"Cut it down, hell!"

Ben's shout lifted Teresa off the edge of the sofa and startled old Cinnamon, sending the cat scrambling for cover. Dennis hadn't seen the old guy this

riled since Jimmy Carter beat Gerald Ford.

"Whatever give you such an idea? Didn't I teach you nothing? Trees are living things, not like them damned vehicles you sell."

Dennis chuckled nervously, shooting a wide-eyed glance at Teresa. "Come on, Dad. Take it easy. You can't have your trees falling down on the neighbors, even Frank."

"Boy, me and your mom used to picnic under that tree. You had an old tire hanging from a rope, remember? You used to swing on that thing for hours. I'll be damned if I'll cut it down."

"But, Dad, if it's rotten . . ."

"Not a damn thing wrong with that tree. No, sir, not a damn thing."

Teresa didn't particularly like visiting Ben Cross when he was acting civil, much less when he was throwing a fit. She reached in her purse and pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and exhaled the smoke impatiently across the room. "Come on, honey, let's go."

"Soon as I finish my beer," Dennis said. "Dad, I just meant that if you had to cut it down, I'd help you with it. We don't have to, though. Whatever you think is best."

Ben waved him off with a disgusted pass of his hand and went back to his chair.

Teresa walked through the kitchen, pausing at the back door. "Den . . . nis! You coming?"

"In a minute, hon."

There was little point in hanging around any longer: he wasn't going to get any money out of the old man today. Even on days when they were getting along well, his dad usually said no. The fact that the bank had threatened to garnish his wages wouldn't make a difference. Ben would tell him to let the car go back, move someplace cheaper, cancel his athletic club membership. The old guy just didn't understand business and, most of all, image.

A man in his line of work had to make contacts, run in the right circles. Then, of course, there was Teresa. She was accustomed to having nice things, getting what she wanted—cars, clothes, perfumes. He couldn't very well ask her to do without.

"I'll come back in a week or so when I can stay longer, Dad. I've got to get Teresa home. She's planning on going out tonight."

Ben nodded.

"You take it easy, you hear?" Dennis patted his father's shoulder, left his beer can sitting on the kitchen table, and hurried out the back door.

Ben watched them drive down the lane, moving slower than the line at the post office—careful not to raise any dust on their fancy foreign car. Teresa lowered the flap with the little mirror on it to check her hair. She turned her head left to right, daintily patting the sides, then fluffing the bottom with her fingers.

"Cut it down, hell," Ben said, as the BMW turned onto the main road and sped away.

Frank Tuggle insisted he cut the old tree down, but Ben Cross refused. Art Jenson from Triple J Nursery scaled sixty-five feet up the Sylvan's trunk to inspect the break. Art said there was absolutely no reason for that limb to have split—no bugs and no disease. He trimmed several of the largest branches that dangled over the property line, but the tree remained standing.

Tuggle's blackened eyes and bandaged nose were the talk of Good Time Pattie's for the next couple of days. Everyone teased him about opening his mouth to the wrong guy, and finally getting it shut. No one in the tavern, knowing Frank Tuggle as they did, believed his story about the tree limb—at least not until Billy Ramirez confirmed it during his evening

rounds. Then, they all laughed about it. And Frank Tuggle didn't like being laughed at.

Today, Tuggle watched his neighbor from the worn green sofa in his front room, a half empty pint of Ten High resting between his legs. His front window, opaque from dirt and smoke, faced the old man's back porch, although his view was partially blocked by the big fir that sat almost directly between the two houses.

From the corner of his lip, a cigarette dangled precariously. The ashes dropped when their weight compelled them to—either landing on his pants and getting rubbed in, or joining the rest of the dirt covering the wooden floor. The house hadn't seen a thorough cleaning in forty years, not since Martha Tuggle died of cancer.

Ben Cross was outside weeding the garden, he and the dog. There were always animals running loose next door—dogs, cats, rabbits. He had owned this particular dog for quite awhile, probably close to ten years.

The old man stooped over the rows, pulling pig weeds and wild carrots. He didn't straighten up between the bushes any more but just kept inching along the dirt like some migrant laborer fresh off the bus. Tuggle started to

laugh, then hacked and spit, strangled by the smoke. Whoever heard of someone needing a tomato bad enough to crawl around in the dirt for it? Certainly not Frank Tuggle.

The collie-mix followed Ben along the rows, heaving his bushy tail, wandering off, then bounding back to the old man for a word or two before trotting away again. Suddenly the dog spotted a rustling in the wild blackberry bushes beneath the Sylvan. His ears sprang up like a pup's. Squirrel.

Ol' Boot ran as though he was ten years younger. He chased the grey-tail along the fence, went down on his belly, and squirted under the rail, following the varmint onto Tuggle's property. Ben was bent over, facing the opposite direction. He didn't see Ol' Boot take off.

Tuggle knew the dog minded Ben Cross the same as a born-again Christian heeded Jesus. Once the old man hollered, the mutt would slam to a halt and high-tail it for home. Tuggle grabbed his 30-30 Winchester from behind the doorjamb and hurried outside, careful not to let the screen door bang shut behind him.

The shot echoed three or four times, and the dog lay dead before the last peal sounded. Ol' Boot yipped when the bullet

found his chest, but considering that the shell could drop an elk, he probably died the moment it hit him.

Ben's arthritic legs faltered, but kept moving. Tuggle waited until his neighbor reached the dog before shouting, wanting to make sure the old man heard him.

"I told you to keep them damned animals on your side. Now you get him the hell off my property."

Ben struggled to lift Ol' Boot. The best he could do was wrap his arms beneath the dog's front legs, and with his rear legs dragging the ground, pull him along. Blood from the gaping hole in the animal's chest warmed Ben's hands, and more stained his shirt from where the bullet tore out his back. Ol' Boot's head dangled limply to the side.

Ben climbed over the fence, then pulled the dog underneath the bottom rung. He gently stroked the black and white coat, now a sticky red, and rubbed that spot behind Ol' Boot's ears where he always liked it. The old man sat beneath the Sylvan holding the dog, and for the first time in eleven years, he cried.

Billy Ramirez drove out immediately after receiving the phone call. There was nothing

he could do, and Tuggle knew it. The dog was on his property. Ben didn't deny it.

Billy buried Ol' Boot beneath the Sylvan, wrapped in the patchwork quilt he'd always slept on behind the easy chair. Ben sat in the white chair, telling how he first got the dog and how he got his name—dragging an old black rubber boot around when he was a pup.

"Schlechter's got some Lab puppies out at his barn." Billy patted the mound gently with the back of the shovel, carefully smoothing the dirt. "Maybe just part Lab, I don't know. Anyway, they're all black. Cute little guys."

Ben chuckled softly, nodding, staring absently at the ground. "Yes, sir, where you going with that old boot? Ol' Boot. . . ." He chuckled again.

Billy finished the grave, then waited, staring numbly toward the grove while Ben continued his disjointed conversation. The stand of fir stood picture-still and silent, as though hushed out of respect for the dog. Billy tipped his head back and gazed up into the Sylvan's branches. The splintered stub of the fallen limb pointed like an accusing finger toward Frank Tuggle's house.

"Got anything to drink up at the house?" Billy asked.

Ben Cross didn't answer. He stared at the mound of dirt, his head and hands suddenly afflicted with a palsy.

Billy reached over and touched the old man's arm. "Ben! Let's go up to the house. You need to get out of those clothes."

Ben gripped Billy's hand with both of his and squeezed as tightly as his gnarled, ancient fingers would allow. He looked up and pulled his lips into a sad yet grateful smile.

"You go on. I'm gonna just sit here for awhile. I do most every night. We both do." He fixed his eyes briefly on the freshly turned dirt, and then back to Billy. "Don't you go worrying about an old man."

"You ought to get out of those clothes and get yourself something to eat."

Ben brushed his hand across the crimson-stained flannel, pressing his lips tightly together. He patted Billy's hand and nodded. "I'll do that, son. You go on now."

The fifty yard walk from the house to the Sylvan was becoming increasingly difficult for Ben Cross. The eighty-plus degree temperatures of August kept him inside most of the day, but every night around seven o'clock he still managed to sit

beneath the tree for an hour or two.

Frank Tuggle was just leaving for Pattie's when he spotted his neighbor outside. Ben Cross seemed to move more slowly every time he saw him. Tonight a pumpkin-colored cat accompanied him. It took awhile, but the old man finally made it to the chair. Once seated, he reached inside his shirt and pulled out an aluminum can.

The dancing girls started at eight, and Tuggle sure didn't want to miss any of the show. He still had time for a little fun before he left, though. He let loose with a hoot and slapped his pants leg, sending dust flying.

A minute later Tuggle's antiquated John Deere tractor sputtered, then caught on. He drove directly to the dirt field bordering the lane, lying dust-dry and fallow. The flat-topped clusters of yellow tansy leaned toward Cross's place in the breeze. Tuggle tilled the field's perimeter, saving the leg closest to Ben Cross for last.

Ben didn't move, but the Sylvan's limbs bristled in the breeze. It seemed that the wind had suddenly picked up. The stand of fir, the grass, the vines, all flapped violently.

"Do it . . ."

Tuggle slowed to take the corner by the main road. He

made the turn, stopped, spit, then adjusted his baseball cap, laughing the whole time. The old man remained seated, barely visible through the thick dust.

Tuggle raced the engine, holering above the noise. "Hey, Cross! You want to plant another garden?"

"Do it . . ." they all whooshed. "Kill the monster, destroy the evil. Do it . . ."

She focused her energy deep in the cool, dark earth. The strength of sun and sky, limb and bough, coursed through her veins, forcing the appendage beneath the road. A year's growth in a moment—two, then three. She forced her root through the soil and up toward the surface, moving swiftly like a warm knife through butter.

"Do it . . . destroy the evil."

Tuggle forced a horselaugh, then opened the tractor up full throttle. The old John Deere topped out at fifteen miles per hour. Dust exploded behind the discs, floating across the driveway in a solid brown wall. The tractor closed within a hundred feet.

The Sylvan's boughs shook in a frenzied twitch, while the surrounding flora rustled anxiously. The billowing dust cloud closed in, choking the sunlight in its path. The front

tire of the John Deere passed overhead.

Now!

Every part of her pushed at that instant. Upward. The root caught the rear tire and pitched the tractor three feet into the air, although not quite enough to overturn it. The impact launched Tuggle, too, the same way a Brahma bull ejects a cowboy from its back. He met the ground face first. Ben saw him fly, but had no idea what had caused the sudden jolt. The tractor turned sharply, traveled another ten feet, then rolled onto its side like a pregnant cow, barely missing Tuggle.

Even as the dust cloud finally overtook him, Ben Cross laughed with a vigor possibly injurious for a man of his age. Tuggle screamed and waved his hat to clear the brown haze, looking for what had tipped him. But there was nothing to see, and he stormed to his house, serenaded by the old man's laughter floating in the wind.

Billy Ramirez decided to drive out to Ben's place. He'd tried calling before he went on duty that morning, and Jenny tried again later in the afternoon, but there was still no answer. The game started in half

an hour, plenty of time to pick up Ben and get back to Ebner Field. Jenny and the girls would meet them there.

Billy knew the old man was lonely with Ol' Boot gone. Now he had only the cat to talk to, and cats weren't such good listeners. Ben resisted the idea of another dog, mainly Billy felt because he worried there'd be no one to take care of it if something happened to him. Billy considered bringing one of Schlechter's puppies over anyway. The worst that could happen was that he'd end up taking it back.

The resin chair beneath the Sylvan sat empty tonight. Billy honked the horn twice, in case Ben was asleep in his easy chair, or on the john. It would give him a couple of minutes to prepare for a visitor. Before, the dog always woke him.

Billy left the car, walked to the garden's edge, and stood looking patiently at where the forest-green horizon touched blue. He'd wait there until the back door finally squeaked open and he heard Ben holler, "How's it going, young fella?"

He checked his watch, wondering what was taking so long. The tomatoes needed water, the green peppers, too. He unwound several coils of green garden hose from the spigot and turned the water on a

quarter turn. Several moments later, he laid the nozzle beneath a wilted beefsteak tomato bush, then reduced the water pressure to a trickle.

He walked to the back porch and pushed the door open.

"Ben! Ben! You in there?"

The white Ford F250 parked in the shed indicated he was home, yet he didn't answer. He might have walked to the woods, Billy thought, but that was quite a hike for the old man. Or perhaps Dennis had come by and picked him up, although that possibility seemed even more unlikely.

Billy waited, his forehead deeply etched, listening.

"Meow . . . meow."

A series of brisk scratching sounds accompanied each of the cat's cries. The old tom desperately wanted out.

Billy called out a second time, then stepped inside the small utility room where the washer, dryer, and freezer were kept. The cat continued to call to him from behind the kitchen door. He peered through the window for Ben, simultaneously rattling the pane with his knuckles.

He turned the knob and eased the door open, still hollering a greeting.

"Hello in there. Ben?"

The tom streaked past, racing outside to the garden. In-

side, Billy heard faint voices—undoubtedly the television. He passed tentatively through the kitchen, stopped in the dining room doorway, then leaned forward and looked to his left into the living room.

Ben occupied the old rose-colored easy chair—head back, eyes closed, mouth open. Billy smiled and walked over, hoping not to startle him.

"Hey, old fella, wake up. I've got a game tonight."

He knew, almost before the words left his mouth. He slid his hand gently along Ben's leathery, wrinkled neck, pressing his fingers against the carotid artery. The old man was dead.

He pulled the matching footstool next to Ben's chair, and sat with his elbows resting on his knees, his face buried in his hands, until the tears stopped.

He phoned Jenny, who was just leaving for the ballpark, and told her first. Next, he called Dr. Roy Keith. He waited out in the yard, watering the garden and pulling a few weeds before walking over to sit beneath the Sylvan. The white chair was vacant, but he sat alongside it on the ground anyway.

Dr. Keith arrived twenty minutes later, followed by Ralph White, the mortician, driving his dark blue station

wagon with the darkened windows and black curtains. In an emergency the doctor would have made the trip in ten minutes, but time no longer mattered to Ben Cross.

"Since last night at the earliest, maybe this morning," Dr. Keith said, pulling the blanket up over Ben's face.

Billy's eyes drifted shut. He rested his hand on the old man's arm, wishing now he had come by yesterday. He stood, straightened the blanket, and walked to the kitchen. The cat, back inside after a much needed trip to the garden, wove between his legs and circled his empty food bowl, yowling. Cinnamon probably hadn't eaten today.

After Ralph White removed Ben's body, Billy rechecked the house, making certain everything was turned off. He lifted the orange tabby, who purred gratefully and relaxed in his arms. He locked the front door behind him, then stood on the porch, stroking the cat, glancing back at the vacant white plastic chair. An uneasy feeling swept over him. Billy's gaze moved away from the tree and fixed on Frank Tuggle, who sat on his own porch, staring back.

"Just give me an excuse, you son of a bitch," Billy said under his breath, walking to his car. He placed Cinnamon on the

passenger seat, then drove home to comfort his family. From there he'd call Dennis.

It's a different kind of tears that people shed for a man past eighty. Ben Cross was self-sufficient right up to the end and died in his own home—something to be grateful for. It's the kind of tears you spend for a meadow making way for an apartment complex, or a stream falling victim to a dam. Tears of passing.

The memory of his own father's death revisited Billy Ramirez that week: at the funeral chapel, at the church, and at the cemetery. He'd miss sitting under the big tree with that old man, talking about his father and the dairy. Remembering. Ben Cross was a good man, and a good neighbor. The hundred or more people gathered at the cemetery were proof of that—the notable exception being Frank Tuggle.

No one expected to see Teresa Cross veiled in black and crying, but her short, tight, floral-print dress and her neon-yellow shoes caught many of the local folks' attention. Dennis smiled and shook everyone's hand and said what a shock it was, but how this was exactly how his dad would have wanted it. He thanked them for

coming, and gave those with money his business card.

Billy and his wife Jenny waited until the throng at the cemetery cleared before offering their condolences.

"I've got a few of your dad's tools at my house," he said, shaking Dennis's hand. "I'll drop them by next time I see you're out there."

"What's a few tools." Dennis cupped his hand to light two cigarettes, then handed one to Teresa. "Keep 'em, I've got no use for them."

"Honey, I think he's right to return them. I mean, tools are valuable, aren't they?" Teresa took a drag from the cigarette and forced the smoke out one side of her mouth.

"I'll put them in the shed," Billy said tautly. "You plan on moving back to Oak Crossing, Dennis?"

"Oh, good God, no. We'll sell the old place—finally have a little money in our pockets."

Billy looked at Jenny. She drew a slow, worried breath and nodded slightly.

"Look, Dennis, I know that now is not the right time, but when you're ready." He paused, reaching for Jenny's hand. "We'd be interested in buying the farm. I've always loved it out there. So do Jenny and the kids. With what my dad left me

and what we've saved, I think we might be able to swing it."

"How much will you pay?" Teresa blurted, her eyes sparkling.

Her reaction, and the smile accompanying it, made Billy regret bringing the subject up—at least today. "Maybe we should discuss it later." His eyes met Jenny's. She shared his embarrassment.

"You're absolutely right." Dennis gripped Teresa around the waist and pulled her against him, landing a sloppy kiss on her cheek. "We need a little time to get over the shock. Right, honey? Next week when you drop the tools off will be soon enough."

Teresa Cross picked up the hand-painted rock and studied it curiously, a smiling yellow cat with a big blue bow tie, a present to Grandpa Ben from one of Billy's girls. She tossed it in the garbage bag.

"Where in the hell did he get all this junk?" She yanked the crayon drawing off the refrigerator door, the seashells from the windowsill, the handmade ceramic vase—into the garbage, all of them. "Christ, just look at this stuff."

"He never threw much away, that's for sure." Dennis pulled a spiral plant stand away from

the wall, dragging it to the middle of the living room. "Honey, look at this! I made it in wood shop back in high school. Mother's Day present. Pretty cool, huh?"

"It's hideous," she said, wincing. "Get rid of it."

Dennis stepped back, solemnly viewing his creation, shrugged, and pushed it into the throwaway pile. None of the furniture was good enough to take to Portland and Teresa wasn't exactly the garage sale type. A couple of trips to the dump, or maybe just a big bonfire, would take care of most of Ben's belongings.

"How much do you think we'll get?" She rotated a porcelain candy dish, one of Evie's favorites, studying the detail. Spotting a small chip, she pitched it into the garbage bag. "Twenty acres should be worth quite a bit, shouldn't it?"

"Well, the house ain't worth nothing, and the land down around the creek's not worth much either, but the timber's worth something. Billy Ramirez knows it, too. I'll get an appraiser out here first thing next week."

She pushed the bedroom door open with her foot and, wrinkling her nose, released a stream of smoke from her cigarette. "What are you going to do with the stuff in there?"

Despite her concern, there was no foul odor. The room retained the smell of the old man and the dog, but was clean, although musty.

"Leave it, I'll box . . ."

A fist rattled the kitchen door.

"Anybody home?"

The sound startled them. They hadn't heard anyone drive up, but that wasn't the only surprise. The face showing through the glass was the last one Dennis Cross ever expected to see on his doorstep. Frank Tuggle. Dennis opened the door, without stepping back or offering him an invitation to come inside.

"Mr. Tuggle, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I wanted to offer my condolences about your father's passing." Tuggle's fingers worked the brim of a dirt-stained cap he held in front of him. He stared at the floor as he spoke. "Yes, sir, *real* sorry to hear it."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Tuggle. That's very kind of you. Isn't it, honey?"

Teresa stopped in the doorway at the far end of the kitchen. Even that was close enough for her to catch a whiff of their visitor's repugnant body odor. Making no attempt to disguise her reaction, she

wrinkled her nose, covered her mouth, and coughed.

There was nothing subtle about Frank Tuggle, either. He leered at Teresa's bulging breasts, exposed nearly to their nipples by a dangerously low-cut suntop.

"Are you two gonna be living here?"

"No . . . no, we live in Portland. We plan to sell the place."

"How much?" Tuggle blurted.

"I haven't fixed a price yet. The appraisal should be finished this coming week."

"That's right." Teresa smiled and stepped closer. "What kind of figure did *you* have in mind, Mr. Tuggle?"

He massaged his stubbled chin, pretending to consider the question, although he knew exactly what he was going to say. "Eighty, ninety thousand, maybe."

"Mr. Tuggle . . ." Dennis started to laugh.

"This house ain't nothing but a shack, and half the land around the creek can't be planted."

"The timber alone is worth that."

"Oh yes." Teresa squeezed between them. "Mr. Ramirez offered us a *lot* more than that."

"The cop? Christ Almighty, you ain't thinking of selling the place to that Mexican, are you?

Cops don't make no money. What in the hell's he gonna pay for it with?" Tuggle hitched his pants up and squared his shoulders. "That son of a bitch down at the bank won't loan me any money, but I got cash, plenty of cash to put down on a contract."

"Mr. Ramirez doesn't seem to think he'll have any trouble getting financing."

"Well, that's probably the truth, damn government *makes* places loan to them kind of people. But it'll take months." He pulled his wallet from his pants pocket and removed a stack of bills, fanning them for Teresa and Dennis to see. They were all one hundred dollar bills.

"I got cash money to put down. More than half. No wait-in', neither."

Teresa's breath sounded like a tiny gasp. She turned to Dennis, a huge smile covering her face.

"I'll certainly consider your offer once I set a price, Mr. Tuggle. And thank you very much for stopping by." He started to push the door shut, but Tuggle's hand caught and held it open.

Tuggle noticed the way Teresa's face lit up when she saw the cash. He'd seen that look before. He knew that Ben's opinion of him didn't make a difference any more. This little gal loved money.

"Just one more thing before I go." Tuggle counted out five of the hundred dollar bills, then stuffed the wallet back in his hip pocket. "That old fir out by the lane is rotten. One more good wind and she'll be down, maybe on top of somebody. Damn near killed me last month."

"My dad mentioned it," Dennis said.

"Plenty of wood I can sell, though." Frank fingered the bills, the way he did on Wednesday nights at Pattie's. He watched the girl's eyes. "Give you five hundred dollars for it. I'll drop it over on my side of the property line too."

"I don't know, my dad . . ."

"Dennis!" Teresa's voice squeaked. "That tree should come down. What if it fell over on the house, or on the car?"

"I didn't want to cause no trouble the first time that limb come down, but if it happens again you'll for damn sure be looking at a lawsuit." Tuggle slowly reached for his wallet. "Won't make no difference in how much you get for the place, you know. Probably worth more with it out of there."

"He's right, Dennis. It's just an eyesore, stuck out there all by itself."

Dennis turned and looked through the kitchen window, watching the Sylvan's limbs

bouncing in the gentle breeze. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand while Teresa tugged persistently at his other arm. Eventually, he reached over and took the cash.

Something felt terribly wrong, but Billy Ramirez couldn't put his finger on it. Halfway up the driveway he stopped, blinked, thinking his eyes deceived him. They didn't. His foot nailed the gas pedal, fanning gravel twenty feet behind him.

She'd fallen on top of the fence dividing their property, smashing a thirty foot section into kindling. The portion of trunk that blocked the lane was already cut away, and her main limbs sheared. Frank Tuggle straddled the fallen giant like Paul Bunyan himself, a big mean grin on his face.

"Tuggle! You son of a bitch! I'll see your ass in jail for this."

"Don't go getting your tail in a knot, José. Young Cross sold her to me." Frank hacked up a mouthful of phlegm and spit it at Billy's feet. "That boy's a lot more reasonable than that old man of his."

"You'd best be telling me the truth, Frank. Don't think I won't check it out."

Tuggle lit a cigarette and dangled it on the edge of his lip, allowing the smoke to curl up

into his eyes, making him squint. "You just do that, sonny. Say, are you in the market for some firewood?"

"Don't push your luck, Tuggle." Billy walked over to the monstrous stump, nearly six feet in diameter. Only a month ago he'd sat under the tree with the old man and his dog. Now, all that remained was a stump, a grave, and the white chair—crushed on its side in the grass.

"Should have heard it crack when it went down. Ooooheee!" Tuggle laughed. "Yes sirree, I'm surprised you didn't hear it clean in town."

Billy glared back at him, his brown-black eyes seeing something less than human in Frank Tuggle. A word played over and over in his mind, so clear and distinct that he could have sworn it was spoken, but he knew he only imagined it. Evil. . . .

The five hundred dollars that Dennis Cross received for the old-growth fir paid for the appraisal, with enough left over for dinner at the Red Lion in Portland. As he expected, Frank Tuggle couldn't qualify for financing, never having worked a day in his life, and Cross wasn't interested in any contract that established a

long-term relationship between the two men.

The earnest money agreement with Billy Ramirez prohibited the removal of additional timber prior to the sale of the property. The argument that ensued over cutting down the Sylvan almost ended the deal, but once they agreed on a price, Billy insisted on an adjustment for the tree—and got it.

It would be at least two months before the sale was closed. The house, built in the 1930's, needed extensive repairs to qualify for financing. Billy planned to do most of the work himself, nights and weekends, in exchange for consideration on the purchase price. The Ramirez family hoped to be living in their new home by Christmas.

Frank Tuggle took a month to cut and split the Sylvan. The steady crack of the axe and snarl of the chain saw carried for miles on the wind, telling of the giant fir's destruction. She might easily have rolled or kicked back the chain saw—cut or crushed him—but instead, did nothing.

"Do it . . ." they encouraged. "Do it while you can. Destroy. . . ."

Her answer was always the same. So many opportunities presented themselves, and yet

one by one they passed, until Tuggle had reduced the entire Sylvan to sixteen-inch pieces of firewood. Again, the same answer, like the final sigh of breath escaping from a dead man's lungs. "Wait . . ."

October's first frost collapsed the annuals into limp brown tangles, and a piercing chill clothed the grass in formal white attire. But the sudden swing in temperature had not caught nature off guard: thick firs and dormancy met the new season. Only Frank Tuggle was unprepared.

When the furnace failed to fire, he cursed it before remembering the tank had gone dry in the spring. The oil company said they could come out tomorrow, but wanted cash up front. No one extended Frank Tuggle credit twice. Not that it mattered; the Sylvan alone should provide enough wood to heat his place for the next three winters. He liked having the oil furnace, though, just to keep the house from icing up during the day when he couldn't keep the fire stoked.

Tuggle almost missed having the old man around. There was no one left to complain about what he did, which actually took some of the fun out of it.

He heard that young Cross had sold the place to that

damned Mexican after all. Now he was going to have to put up with a bunch of little Mexicans running around next door. Well, they had a thing or two to learn, and Frank Tuggle was going to be their teacher.

He drove into Oak Crossing that afternoon, stopping first at the Farmer's Co-op to pay for the furnace oil. He gave the clerk at the Co-op a piece of his mind and ended up being told to leave—if he *ever* wanted to get his delivery.

At five o'clock the Dodge rolled into the parking lot at Good Time Pattie's. It turned out to be a big night for Frank Tuggle, who hit a three hundred dollar jackpot on the video poker machine. Everyone in the tavern appreciated the round he bought for the house, but they soon tired of hearing about his big win.

When Tuggle finally left Pattie's at midnight, he'd lost one hundred and fifty dollars of his own money, plus the three hundred, but he still bragged about winning the jackpot. Before heading home, he waited in the parking lot until the patrol car cruised past going in the opposite direction. He knew that the Oak Crossing police, especially Ramirez, would like nothing better than to hang a DUI on Frank Tuggle.

He drove slowly, cautiously, at first. A tiger-striped cat streaked across the road in front of the Dodge, and he punched the gas and whipped the wheel, trying to hit it. "That's only eight left, pussy-cat!" he shouted as the feline darted safely into the ditch. "Oooooowhee!"

Frank Tuggle felt good. The gray pickup staggered along the country road, drifting from ditch to ditch. Luckily, no other man or animal crossed his path the rest of the way home.

It was half past midnight when he stumbled in his back door. Even as boozed up as he was, the cold air still stung his face and hands. The temperature had already dropped below freezing. By morning, especially once the whisky wore off, the house would be colder than yesterday's breakfast. He made two trips outside, carrying in enough fir to fill the woodbox.

Although not fully seasoned, the Sylvan was dry enough to burn. He layered the paper and kindling, stacked several good-sized pieces of the fir on top, then touched a match to it. The flames crawled through the paper and sticks, promptly igniting into a brilliant orange ball when they reached the Sylvan. The fire took off so well that he piled two more pieces of wood

on top of the blaze before going to bed.

Tuggle dropped his pants beside the bed but kept his shirt and socks on, since it was still quite chilly inside the house. There weren't any sheets on the bed, only a pile of olive-green army blankets, tucked partially in at the bottom. Tired and full of liquor, he quickly dropped off to sleep.

The fire snapped and popped in a lively rhythm. The orange-red inferno reflected off the bedroom door, its flames shadow-dancing across the living room walls.

Her voice had changed. The soft murmur that for so many years harmonized with the wind, hissed and crackled with laughter in the flames. Smoke rose up the chimney and swirled above the house, dancing on the crisp air to a chorus of a thousand voices.

"Do it. . . ."

The white haze formed slender, ivory fingers above the chimney top. The hand circled gracefully—palm up, digits extended—in a sweeping gesture of greeting. Abruptly the fingers tightened, forming an opaque fist that disappeared down the flue.

Inside the house, a white serpent of smoke slithered from the fireplace, tracing large S's slowly across the hardwood

floor. The vaporous viper floated into the bedroom and coiled there. Her steamy voice now hissed softly. The apparition's wavering outline suddenly molded into an opaque shape, that of a woman's head and torso narrowing into a thick, spiraled, reptilian tail. She hovered at the end of the bed, her rasping whisper beckoning him.

"Frank . . ."

Starting at his feet, the creamy-white figure glided along Tuggle's body until she completely shrouded him in white. She clutched his shoulders with slender, spurred fingers, and arched her back, positioning her chalky-colored face directly above his.

"Frank . . ."

His eyes, then mouth, gaped in silent, unspeakable terror.

She covered Tuggle's mouth with her own, releasing her flaming breath within him.

When his convulsions ceased, replaced by twitching, she coiled around him and raised her head. His eyes and mouth remained open, posed in the same silent scream. Smoke rose in a leisurely breath from his throat, the escaping air thick with the stench of freshly cooked flesh.

She covered his mouth with hers a second time, inhaling the evidence of her presence

from deep within his body cavity, then closed his eyes and mouth and flooded the house with smoke.

The funeral was scarcely larger than Ben Cross had predicted—a half dozen, including the undertaker and his assistant. One fact that mourners all commented upon—it was the most beautiful day one could imagine for a sendoff from this earth. Nature had dressed in her most vivid blues and greens, bejeweling herself in golden autumn sunshine, as though to celebrate the occasion.

Everyone at Pattie's remembered that Tuggle had been drinking all night long, so they weren't surprised he'd forgotten to open the flue, or that he didn't smell the smoke before he passed out.

The population of Oak Crossing consisted of good people, good neighbors, so in spite of what they all thought, most of them said it was too bad, a real shame that it happened.

Dennis and Teresa Cross certainly didn't think anything of it. That is, until they received the call from Ernest Coleman of ORCO, Inc., one of the Willamette Valley's largest nurseries. ORCO not only wanted to buy Frank Tuggle's property,

but the Cross place, too. Without even dickering, Coleman threw out a figure fifteen thousand dollars higher than Billy Ramirez's offer.

Suddenly, the one hundred sixty thousand dollars they'd dreamed about for the past month seemed a pittance. There had to be a way out of the deal with Billy Ramirez. The old place needed quite a bit of work; perhaps he wouldn't be able to meet the financing deadline. They jumped into the BMW and raced to Oak Crossing, hoping they'd find the required improvements lagging behind.

A month had passed since Dennis and Teresa last visited the farm. The sight of the freshly painted house—shell white with blue-gray trim—and the neatly manicured yard caused them both to curse Billy Ramirez's efficiency. The place looked inhabitable, even by Teresa's standards, much the same as it did when Ben and Evie were young.

Inside, the scent of fresh paint and disinfectant obliterated the smells of old age and animals. The pieces of furniture they'd piled in the corner of the front room, intending to burn, sat rearranged throughout the house. Dennis's old box spring and mattress wore new floral sheets and a comforter,

and matching curtains covered the bedroom window. Apparently Billy spent some nights in the house after working late. Tonight, however, the house was empty.

Billy had filled the oil barrel and set the thermostat at sixty-five to keep the house from freezing up. Outside, he'd wrapped the water pipes, trimmed the perennials, and covered them with grass clippings.

"Damn!" Dennis slammed the door to the back porch. "There's no way Billy's loan won't go through. He's probably finished now, except maybe for the wiring. I can't tell whether that's fixed or not."

Teresa took a hard draw on her cigarette and glanced around the front room, tipping her head back to exhale the smoke. "What would have to happen in order for him *not* to get his financing?" She smiled at Dennis and tapped her cigarette, sending the ashes to the floor.

"What are you talking about, hon? As far as I can tell, he's almost got everything done."

"Barring any unexpected problems." She bit her bottom lip, smiled and moved against him. "Why don't we just stay here tonight and give it some thought."

Dennis raised her hand, bringing the cigarette to his lips, took the last drag, then tossed the butt in the fireplace.

"What do you have in mind, babe?"

"Can we start a fire first?" she asked, snuggling against him. "It's cold in here."

Dennis hadn't seen any wood outside but remembered the dozen cords stacked beside Frank Tuggle's vacant house. It was a short walk, and Tuggle sure wasn't going to miss it.

"I'll take the wheelbarrow down and get some wood. See if you can find some paper to get a fire started." He tweaked her breasts and grabbed for her rear end, but she giggled and backed out of reach.

"Get the fire going . . . first."

Dennis hurried. He filled the wheelbarrow with fir and trotted back toward the house, his breath colored white by the brisk evening air. The exercise sent blood pounding through his chest, rivaling the throbbing in his groin. He'd slept on that old bed nearly twenty years, but he'd never had sex on it, other than by himself. He remembered the way the springs announced every little movement, and looked forward to making them squeak, without worrying someone might hear.

Inside the house, Teresa found a stack of newspapers under the sink. She crumpled several sheets, then rolled and twisted the remaining papers. Dennis rushed in and dropped an armload of wood on the floor. It took him three trips to carry it all in.

Teresa knelt alongside while he touched a match beneath the wood. The flames quickly devoured the paper.

"You said Billy had everything all winterized. What if he didn't?"

"Cold as it's been getting, the pipes could freeze and break, cause all sorts of water damage." Dennis stopped and frowned curiously at his wife, whose face glowed radiantly in the fledgling flames. "He's already done it, hon."

"Well, what if it got undone, right before they came out to inspect the place? What if somebody turned the water on and just left?"

Dennis stared into the flames, mesmerized by the ferocity of the blaze. "Billy's put a lot of time into this place. We could get ourselves sued."

"Then we just give him back his damn thousand dollars. Why should we give up fifteen thousand dollars just because some Mexican spent a few hours of his time painting? We

don't owe him anything, Dennis. This is *our* house."

The fir crackled and popped, loosing a shower of sparks. The couple backed away from the flames.

"You're right, honey. We don't owe him anything. I'll talk to Billy tomorrow and find out how close he is to being finished. But we don't want to act too soon or he might have time to clean it up."

Once he let Teresa have her way, she always gave him anything he wanted. Dennis's hands circled her waist, then slipped down to massage her buttocks and pull her against him. She responded with a soft laugh and, after letting him have his feel, led him into the bedroom. He started to close the door behind them, but changed his mind at the last moment, pushing it all the way open instead so the heat could circulate.

Within fifteen minutes, the bedsprings ceased their cadence and the house grew quiet. In the front room, the flames danced impatiently atop the Sylvan, but she waited until the rhythm of Dennis's snoring guaranteed he was sleeping, at last hissing the command.

"Do it. . . ."

One by one, delicate red tongues of flame leapt from the

hearth and skittered across the floor toward the bedroom. They moved quickly and silently, careful not to scorch the linoleum beneath their path. The army of scarlet lights encircled the bed, sprang to the comforter, ignited its edges, and crawled slowly up its sides.

"What the hell!" Dennis shot upright.

The flames covered them in an instant. They swarmed Teresa's platinum hair, igniting her head into a giant, orange fireball. She opened her mouth to scream, and the flames rushed in to silence her, covering her, inside and out.

According to the passing motorist, the whole house looked ablaze, yet only a few sparks and smoke remained when the firetrucks arrived. Miraculously, the flames hadn't spread to the walls or ceiling.

The charred remains of Teresa Cross sent more than one of the men rushing outside to lose his dinner. Billy Ramirez had witnessed death before—people in pieces, twisted in the wreckage of automobiles—but nothing like this. Dennis had made it to the door but apparently couldn't open it before the smoke overcame him.

"There's the butt right there," Fire Chief Tom Kirkpatrick said, pointing at a blackened cigarette filter beneath the bed frame. "My God, you'd think people would know better. Husband would have probably made it if they'd just left the door open. Why do you suppose they closed it, anyway?"

"Probably out of habit from when he was a kid," Billy watched them lift Dennis onto the gurney. "He grew up in this house, you know."

"Hard to believe the whole place didn't go up," Kirkpatrick winced, watching them carefully lift Teresa's remains into a body bag. "You're buying this house, aren't you?"

Billy nodded and went down on one knee in front of the hearth and its faintly glowing embers. "I can't even imagine what the hell they were doing out here. They never called."

"Well, that old metal bed frame is probably what saved the house. Fresh coat of paint on the walls and ceiling in that room, couple of days with the window open, and you'll never know it happened. You might be able to sand down the floor,

or just throw a piece of carpet over it."

Billy rotated his hands in front of the coals. With the doors all wide open while the smoke cleared, the house had become quite chilly.

"Who'll be handling the place now?" Kirkpatrick asked.

"What?"

"The estate? Who'll be handling the estate now that the son's dead? They usually name an alternate. I'll need to get in touch with him."

Billy Ramirez couldn't force himself to look at Kirkpatrick as he spoke the words.

"I am."

"Hell, don't be embarrassed about it. You didn't show these people how to smoke in bed. Besides, everybody knows the old man thought a lot of you. You've done a hell of a job with the old place."

"Thanks, Tom. I plan to leave it pretty much the way Ben had it. I might run a few head of cattle back in the woods—plant a few more trees."

Billy offered the palms of his hands to the embers once again. The remaining coals brightened, as though a soft breath stirred them back to life, and the waning fire lovingly caressed the young man's hands with her fleeting warmth.

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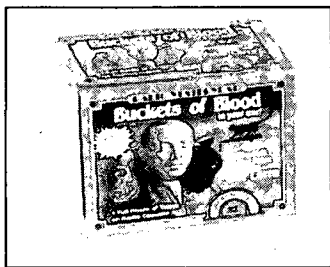
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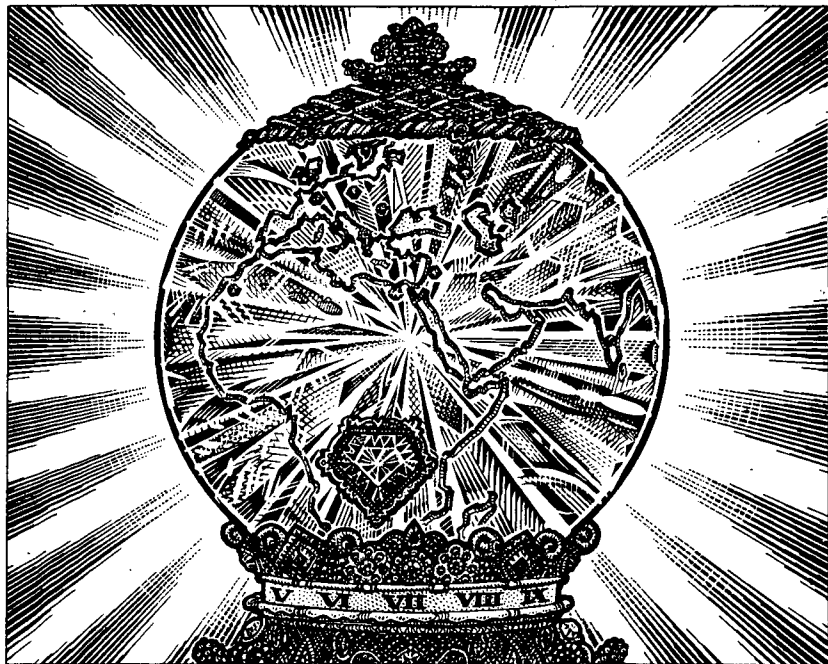
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Property of a Lady

by Ian Fleming



It was, exceptionally, a hot day in early June. James Bond put down the dark gray chalk pencil that was the marker for the dockets routed to the Double-O Section and took off his coat. He didn't bother to hang it over the back of his chair, let alone take the trouble to get up and drape the coat over the hanger Mary Goodnight had suspended, at her own cost (damn women!), behind the Office of Works' green door of his connecting office. He dropped the coat on the floor.

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Illustration by Steve Chalker

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There was no reason to keep the coat immaculate, the creases tidy. There was no sign of any work to be done. All over the world there was quiet. The In and Out signals had, for weeks, been routine. The daily top secret SITREP, even the newspapers, yawned vacuously—in the latter case scratchings at domestic scandals for readership, for bad news, the only news that makes such sheets readable, whether top secret or on sale for pennies.

Bond hated these periods of vacuum. His eyes, his mind, were barely in focus as he turned the pages of a jaw-breaking dissertation by the Scientific Research Station on the Russian use of cyanide gas, propelled by the cheapest bulb-handled children's water pistol, for assassination. The spray, it seemed, directed at the face, took instantaneous effect. It was recommended for victims from twenty-five years upward, on ascending stairways or inclines. The verdict would then probably be heart failure.

The harsh burr of the red telephone sprayed into the room so suddenly that James Bond, his mind elsewhere, reached his hand automatically toward his left armpit in self-defense. The edges of his mouth turned down as he recognized the reflex. On the second burr he picked up the receiver.

"Sir?"

"Sir."

He got up from his chair and picked up his coat. He put on the coat and at the same time put on his mind. He had been dozing in his bunk. Now he had to go up on the bridge. He walked through into the connecting office and resisted the impulse to ruffle up the inviting nape of Mary Goodnight's golden neck.

He told her "M." and walked out into the close-carpeted corridor and along, between the muted whiz and zing of the Communications Section, of which his Section was a neighbor, to the lift and up to the eighth.

Miss Moneypenny's expression conveyed nothing. It usually conveyed something if she knew something—private excitement, curiosity, or, if Bond was in trouble, encouragement or even anger. Now the smile of welcome showed disinterest. Bond registered that this was going to be some kind of routine job, a bore, and he adjusted his entrance through that fateful door accordingly.

There was a visitor—a stranger. He sat on M.'s left. He only briefly glanced up as Bond came in and took his usual place across the red leather-topped desk.

M. said, stiffly, "Dr. Fanshawe, I don't think you've met Com-

mander Bond of my Research Department."

Bond was used to these euphemisms.

He got up and held out his hand. Dr. Fanshawe rose, briefly touched Bond's hand, and sat quickly down as if he had touched paws with a gila monster.

If he looked at Bond, inspected him, and took him in as anything more than an anatomical silhouette, Bond thought that Dr. Fanshawe's eyes must be fitted with a thousandth-of-a-second shutter. So this was obviously some kind of expert—a man whose interests lay in facts, things, theories—not in human beings.

Bond wished that M. had given him some kind of brief, hadn't got this puckish, rather childishly malign desire to surprise—to spring the jack-in-a-box on his staff. But Bond, remembering his own boredom of ten minutes ago, and putting himself in M.'s place, had the intuition to realize that M. himself might have been subject to the same June heat, the same oppressive vacuum in his duties, and, faced by the unexpected relief of an emergency, a small one perhaps, had decided to extract the maximum effect, the maximum drama, out of it to relieve his own tedium.

The stranger was middle-aged, rosy, well-fed, and clothed rather foppishly in the neo-Edwardian fashion—turned-up cuffs to his dark blue, four-buttoned coat, a pearl pin in a heavy silk cravat, spotless wing collar, cufflinks formed of what appeared to be antique coins, pince-nez on a thick black ribbon. Bond summed him up as something literary, a critic perhaps, a bachelor—possibly with homosexual tendencies.

M. said, "Dr. Fanshawe is a noted authority on antique jewelry. He is also, though this is confidential, adviser to H.M. Customs and to the C.I.D. on such things. He has in fact been referred to me by our friends at M.I.5. It is in connection with our Miss Freudenstein."

Bond raised his eyebrows. Maria Freudenstein was a secret agent working for the Soviet KGB in the heart of the Secret Service. She was in the Communications Department, but in a water-tight compartment of it that had been created especially for her, and her duties were confined to operating the Purple Cipher—a cipher which had also been created especially for her. Six times a day she was responsible for encoding and dispatching lengthy SITREPS in this cipher to the C.I.A. in Washington. These messages were the output of Section 100, which was responsible for running double agents. They were an ingenious mixture of true

facts, harmless disclosures, and an occasional nugget of the grossest misinformation.

Maria Freudenstein, who had been known to be a Soviet agent when she was taken into the Service, had been allowed to steal the key to the Purple Cipher with the intention that the Russians should have complete access to these SITREPS—be able to intercept and decipher them—and thus, when appropriate, be fed false information. It was a highly secret operation which needed to be handled with extreme delicacy; but it had now been running smoothly for three years and, if Maria Freudenstein also picked up a certain amount of canteen gossip at Headquarters, that was a necessary risk, and she was not attractive enough to form liaisons which could be a security risk.

M. turned to Dr. Fanshawe. "Perhaps, doctor, you would care to tell Commander Bond what it is all about."

"Certainly, certainly." Dr. Fanshawe looked quickly at Bond and then away again. He addressed his boots. "You see, it's like this, er, commander. You've heard of a man called Faberge, no doubt. Famous Russian jeweler."

"Made fabulous Easter eggs for the czar and czarina before the revolution."

"That was indeed one of his specialties. He made many other exquisite pieces of what we may broadly describe as objects of vertu. Today, in the sale rooms, the best examples fetch truly fabulous prices—fifty thousand pounds and more. And recently there entered this country the most amazing specimen of all—the so-called Emerald Sphere, a work of supreme art hitherto known only from a sketch by the great man himself. This treasure arrived by registered post from Paris and it was addressed to this woman of whom you know, Miss Maria Freudenstein."

"Nice little present. Might I ask how you learned of it, doctor?"

"I am, as your chief has told you, an adviser of H.M. Customs and Excise in matters concerning antique jewelry and similar works of art. The declared value of the package was one hundred thousand pounds. This was unusual. There are methods of opening such packages clandestinely. The package was opened—under a Home Office Warrant, of course—and I was called in to examine the contents and give a valuation. I immediately recognized the Emerald Sphere from the account and sketch of it given in Mr. Kenneth Snowman's definitive work on Faberge. I said that the declared price might well be on the low side. But what I found of particular

interest was the accompanying document which gave, in Russian and French, the provenance of this priceless object."

Dr. Fanshawe gestured toward a photostat of what appeared to be a brief family tree that lay on the desk in front of M. "That is a copy I had made. Briefly, it states that the Sphere was commissioned by Miss Freudenstein's grandfather directly from Faberge in 1917—no doubt as a means of turning some of his rubles into something portable and of great value. On his death in 1918 it passed to his brother and thence, in 1950, to Miss Freudenstein's mother. She, it appears, left Russia as a child and lived in White Russian emigre circles in Paris. She never married, but gave birth to this girl, Maria, illegitimately. It seems that she died last year and that some friend or executor, the paper is not signed, has forwarded the Sphere to its rightful owner, Miss Maria Freudenstein.

"I had no reason to question this girl, although as you can imagine my interest was most lively, until last month Sotheby's announced that they would auction the piece, described as 'the property of a lady,' a week from today. On behalf of the British Museum and, er, other interested parties, I then made discreet inquiries and met the lady, who, with perfect composure, confirmed the rather unlikely story contained in the provenance. It was then that I learned that she worked for the Ministry of Defense and it crossed my rather suspicious mind that it was, to say the least of it, odd that a junior clerk, engaged presumably on sensitive duties, should suddenly receive a gift to the value of a hundred thousand pounds or more from abroad. I spoke to a senior official in M.I.5 with whom I have some contact through my work for H.M. Customs, and I was in due course referred to this, er, department." Dr. Fanshawe spread his hands and gave Bond a brief glance. "And that, commander, is all I have to tell you."

M. broke in, "Thank you, doctor. Just one or two final questions and I won't detain you any further. You have examined this emerald ball thing and you pronounce it genuine?"

Dr. Fanshawe ceased gazing at his boots. He looked up and spoke to a point somewhere above M.'s left shoulder. "Certainly. So does Mr. Snowman of Wartski's, the greatest Faberge experts and dealers in the world. It is undoubtedly the missing masterpiece of which hitherto Carl Faberge's sketch was the only record."

"What about the provenance? What do the experts say about that?"

"It stands up adequately. The greatest Faberge pieces were nearly always privately commissioned. Miss Freudenstein says that her grandfather was a vastly rich man before the revolution—a porcelain manufacturer. Ninety-nine percent of all Faberge's output has found its way abroad. There are only a few pieces left in the Kremlin—described simply as 'pre-revolutionary examples of Russian jewelry.' The official Soviet view has always been that they are merely capitalist baubles. Officially they despise them as they officially despise their superb collection of French Impressionists."

"So the Soviets still retain some examples of the work of this man Faberge. Is it possible that this emerald affair could have lain secreted somewhere in the Kremlin through all these years?"

"Certainly. The Kremlin treasure is vast. No one knows what they keep hidden. They have only recently put on display what they have wanted to put on display."

M. drew on his pipe. His eyes through the smoke were bland, scarcely interested. "So that, in theory, there is no reason why this emerald ball should not have been unearthed from the Kremlin, furnished with a faked history to establish ownership, and transferred abroad as a reward to some friend of Russia for services rendered?"

"None at all. It would be an ingenious method of greatly rewarding the beneficiary without the danger of paying large sums into his, or her, bank account."

"But the final monetary reward would of course depend on the amount realized by the sale of the object—the auction price for instance?"

"Exactly."

"And what do you expect this object to fetch at Sotheby's?"

"Impossible to say. Wartski's will certainly bid very high. But of course they wouldn't be prepared to tell anyone just how high—either on their own account for stock, so to speak, or acting on behalf of a customer. Much would depend on how high they are forced up by an underbidder. Anyway, not less than a hundred thousand pounds I'd say."

"Hm." M.'s mouth turned down at the corners. "Expensive hunk of jewelry."

Dr. Fanshawe was aghast at this barefaced revelation of M.'s philistinism. He actually looked M. straight in the face. "My dear sir," he expostulated, "do you consider the stolen Goya, sold at

Sotheby's for one hundred forty thousand pounds, that went to the National Gallery, just an expensive hunk, as you would put it, of canvas and paint?"

M. said placatingly, "Forgive me, Dr. Fanshawe. I expressed myself clumsily. I have never had the leisure to interest myself in works of art nor, on a naval officer's pay, the money to acquire any. I was just registering my dismay at the runaway prices being fetched at auction these days."

"You are entitled to your views, sir," said Dr. Fanshawe stuffily.

Bond thought it was time to rescue M. He also wanted to get Dr. Fanshawe out of the room so that they could get down to the professional aspects of this odd business. He got to his feet. He said to M., "Well, sir, I don't think there is anything else I need to know. No doubt this will turn out to be perfectly straightforward" (like hell it would!) "and just a matter of one of your staff turning out to be a very lucky woman. But it's very kind of Dr. Fanshawe to have gone to so much trouble." He turned to Dr. Fanshawe. "Would you care to have a staff car take you where you're going?"

"No, thank you, thank you very much. It will be pleasant to walk across the park."

Hands were shaken, goodbyes said, and Bond showed the doctor out. Bond came back into the room. M. had taken a bulky file, stamped with the top-secret red star, out of a drawer and was already immersed in it. Bond took his seat again and waited. The room was silent save for the riffling of paper. This also stopped as M. extracted a foolscap sheet of blue cardboard used for Confidential Staff Records and carefully read through the forest of close type on both sides.

Finally he slipped it back in the file and looked up. "Yes," he said and the blue eyes were bright with interest. "It fits all right. The girl was born in Paris in 1935. Mother very active in the Resistance during the war. Helped run the Tulip Escape Route and got away with it. After the war the girl went to the Sorbonne and then got a job in the embassy, in the naval attache's office, as an interpreter. You know the rest. She was compromised—some unattractive sexual business—by some of her mother's old Resistance friends who by then were working for NKVD, and from then on she has been working under Control. She applied, no doubt on instruction, for British citizenship.

"Her clearance from the embassy and her mother's Resistance record helped her to get that by 1959, and she was then recom-

mended to us by the F.O. But it was there that she made her big mistake. She asked for a year's leave before coming to us and was next reported by the Hutchinson network in the Leningrad espionage school. There she presumably received the usual training and we had to decide what to do about her. Section 100 thought up the Purple Cipher operation, and you know the rest. She's been working for three years inside headquarters for the KGB, and now she's getting her reward—this emerald ball thing worth a hundred thousand pounds.

"And that's interesting on two counts. First, it means that the KGB is totally hooked on the Purple Cipher or they wouldn't be making this fantastic payment. That's good news. It means that we can hot up the material we're passing over—put across some Grade 3 deception material and perhaps even move up to Grade 2. Secondly, it explains something we've never been able to understand—that this girl hasn't hitherto received a single payment for her services. We were worried by that. She had an account at Glyn, Mills that only registered her monthly paycheck of around fifty pounds. And she's consistently lived within it. Now she's getting her payoff in one large lump sum via this bauble we've been learning about. All very satisfactory."

M. reached for the ashtray made out of a twelve inch shell base and rapped out his pipe with the air of a man who has done a good afternoon's work.

Bond shifted in his chair. He badly needed a cigarette, but he wouldn't have dreamed of lighting one. He wanted one to help him focus his thoughts. He felt that there were some ragged edges to this problem—one particularly. He said mildly, "Have we ever caught up with her local Control, sir? How does she get her instructions?"

"Doesn't need to," said M. impatiently, busying himself with his pipe. "Once she'd got hold of the Purple Cipher, all she needed to do was hold down her job. Damn it, man, she's pouring the stuff into their lap six times a day. What sort of instructions would they need to give her? I doubt if the KGB men in London even know of her existence—perhaps the Resident Director does, but as you know we don't even know who he is. Give my eyes to find out."

Bond suddenly had a flash of intuition. It was as if a camera had started grinding in his skull, grinding out a length of clear film. He said quietly, "It might be that this business at Sotheby's could show him to us—show us who he is."

"What the devil are you talking about, 007? Explain yourself."

"Well, sir," Bond's voice was calm with certainty, "you remember what this Dr. Fanshawe said about an underbidder—someone to make these Wartski merchants go to their very top price. If the Russians don't seem to know or care very much about Faberge, as Dr. Fanshawe says, they may have no very clear idea what this thing's really worth. The KGB wouldn't be likely to know about such things anyway. They may imagine it's only worth its break-up value—say ten or twenty thousand pounds for the emerald. That sort of sum would make more sense than the small fortune the girl's going to get if Dr. Fanshawe's right.

"Well, if the Resident Director is the only man who knows about this girl, he will be the only man who knows she's been paid. So he'll be the underbidder. He'll be sent to Sotheby's and told to push the sale through the roof. I'm certain of it. So we'll be able to identify him and we'll have enough on him to have him sent home. He just won't know what's hit him. Nor will the KGB. If I can go to the sale and bowl him out and we've got the place covered with cameras, and the auction records, we can get the F.O. to declare him *persona non grata* inside a week. And Resident Directors don't grow on trees. It may be months before the KGB can appoint a replacement."

M. said thoughtfully, "Perhaps you've got something there." He swiveled his chair around and gazed out of the big window toward the jagged skyline of London. Finally he said, over his shoulder, "All right, 007. Go and see the chief of staff and set the machinery up. I'll square things with Five. It's their territory, but it's our bird. There won't be any trouble. But don't go and get carried away and bid for this bit of rubbish yourself. I haven't got the money to spare."

Bond said, "No, sir." He got to his feet and went quickly out of the room. He thought he had been very clever and he wanted to see if he had. He didn't want M. to change his mind.

Wartski has a modest, ultramodern frontage at 138 Regent Street. The window, with a restrained show of modern and antique jewelry, gave no hint that these were the greatest Faberge dealers in the world. The interior—gray carpet, walls paneled in sycamore, a few unpretentious vitrines—held none of the excitement of Cartier's, Boucheron, or Van Cleef, but the group of framed Royal Warrants from Queen Mary, the Queen Mother of Greece, and the

unlikely King Frederick IX of Denmark suggested that this was no ordinary jeweler.

James Bond asked for Mr. Kenneth Snowman. A goodlooking, very well-dressed man of about forty rose from a group of men sitting with their heads together at the back of the room and came forward.

Bond said quietly, "I'm from the C.I.D. Can we have a talk? Perhaps you'd like to check my credentials first. My name's James Bond. But you'll have to go direct to Sir Ronald Vallance or his P.A. I'm not directly on the strength at Scotland Yard. Sort of liaison job."

The intelligent, observant eyes didn't appear even to look him over. The man smiled, "Come on downstairs. Just having a talk with some American friends—sort of correspondents really. From 'Old Russia' on Fifth Avenue."

"I know the place," said Bond. "Full of rich-looking icons and so on. Not far from the Pierre."

"That's right." Mr. Snowman seemed even more reassured. He led the way down a narrow, thickly carpeted stairway into a large and glittering showroom which was obviously the real treasurehouse of the shop. Gold and diamonds and cut stones winked from lit cases round the walls.

"Have a seat. Cigarette?"

Bond took one of his own. "It's about this Faberge that's coming up at Sotheby's tomorrow—this Emerald Sphere."

"Ah, yes." Mr. Snowman's clear brow furrowed, anxiously. "No trouble about it, I hope?"

"Not from your point of view. But we're very interested in the actual sale. We know about the owner, Miss Freudenstein. We think there may be an attempt to raise the bidding artificially. We're interested in the underbidder—assuming, that is, that your firm will be leading the field, so to speak."

"Well, er, yes," said Mr. Snowman with rather careful candor. "We're certainly going to go after it. Between you and me, we believe the V and A are going to bid, and probably the Metropolitan. But is it some crook you're after? If so you needn't worry. This is out of their class."

Bond said, "No. We're not looking for a crook." He wondered how far to go with this man. Because people are very careful with the secrets of their own business doesn't mean that they'll be careful

with the secrets of yours. Bond picked up a wood and ivory plaque that lay on the table. It said:

*It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer.
But when he is gone his way, he boasteth.*

Proverbs XX, 14

Bond was amused. He said so. "You can read the whole history of the bazaar, of the dealer and the customer, behind the quotation," he said. He looked Mr. Snowman straight in the eyes. "I need that sort of nose, that sort of intuition in this case. Will you give me a hand?"

"Certainly. If you'll tell me how I can help." He waved a hand. "If it's secrets you're worried about, please don't worry. Jewelers are used to them. Scotland Yard will probably give my firm a clean bill in that respect. Heaven knows we've had enough to do with them over the years."

"And if I told you that I'm from the Ministry of Defense?"

"Same thing," said Mr. Snowman. "You can naturally rely absolutely on my discretion."

Bond made up his mind. "All right. Well, all this comes under the Official Secrets Act, of course. We suspect that the underbidder, presumably to you, will be a Soviet agent. My job is to establish his identity. Can't tell you any more, I'm afraid. And you don't actually need to know any more. All I want is to go with you to Sotheby's tomorrow night and for you to help me spot the man. No medals, I'm afraid, but we'd be extremely grateful."

Mr. Kenneth Snowman's eyes glinted with enthusiasm. "Of course. Delighted to help in any way. But," he looked doubtful, "you know it's not necessarily going to be all that easy. Peter Wilson, the head of Sotheby's who'll be taking the sale, would be the only person who could tell us for sure—that is, if the bidder wants to stay secret. There are dozens of ways of bidding without making any movement at all. But if the bidder fixes his method, his code so to speak, with Peter Wilson before the sale, Peter wouldn't think of letting anyone in on the code. It would give the bidder's game away to reveal his limit. And that's a close secret, as you can imagine, in the rooms. And a thousand times not if you come with me.

"I shall probably be setting the pace. I already know how far I'm going to go—for a client, by the way—but it would make my job

vastly easier if I could tell how far the underbidder's going to go. As it is, what you've told me has been a great help. I shall warn my man to put his sights even higher. If this chap of yours has got a strong nerve, he may push me very hard indeed. And there will be others in the field of course. It sounds as if this is going to be quite a night. They're putting it on television and asking all the millionaires and dukes and duchesses for the sort of gala performance Sotheby's do rather well. Wonderful publicity, of course. By jove, if they knew there was cloak-and-dagger stuff mixed up with the sale, there'd be a riot! Now then, is there anything else to go into? Just spot this man and that's all?"

"That's all. How much do you think this thing will go for?"

Mr. Snowman tapped his teeth with a gold pencil. "Well, now, you see that's where I have to keep quiet. I know how high I'm going to go, but that's my client's secret." He paused and looked thoughtful. "Let's say that if it goes for less than a hundred thousand pounds we'll be surprised."

"I see," said Bond. "Now then, how do I get into the sale?"

Mr. Snowman produced an elegant alligator-skin notecase and extracted two engraved bits of pasteboard. He handed one over. "That's my wife's. I'll get her one somewhere else in the rooms. B.5—well placed in the center front. I'm B.6."

Bond took the ticket. It said:

SOTHEBY & Co.
Sale of
A Casket of Magnificent Jewels
and
A Unique Object of Vertu by
Carl Faberge
The Property of a Lady
Admit one to the Main Sale Room
Tuesday, 20 June, at 5:30 P.M. precisely
Entrance in St. George Street

"It's not the old Georgian entrance in Bond Street," commented Mr. Snowman. "They have an awning and red carpets out from their back door now that Bond Street's one way. Now," he got up from his chair, "would you care to see some Faberge? We've got some pieces from the Kremlin around 1927. It'll give you some idea what all the fuss is about, though of course the Emerald Sphere's

incomparably finer than anything I can show you by Faberge apart from the Imperial Easter Eggs."

Later, dazzled by the diamonds, the multicolored gold, the silken sheen of translucent enamels, James Bond walked up and out of the Aladdin's Cave under Regent Street and went off to spend the rest of the day in drab offices around Whitehall planning drearily minute arrangements for the identification and photographing of a man in a crowded room who did not yet possess a face or an identity but who was certainly the top Soviet spy in London.

Through the next day Bond's excitement mounted. He found an excuse to go into the Communications Section and wander into the little room where Miss Maria Freudenstein and two assistants were working the cipher machines that handled the Purple Cipher dispatches. He picked up the *en clair* file—he had freedom of access to most material at headquarters—and ran his eye down the carefully edited paragraphs that, in half an hour or so, would be spiked, unread, by some junior C.I.A. clerk in Washington and, in Moscow, be handed, with reverence, to a top-ranking officer of the KGB. He joked with the two junior girls, but Maria Freudenstein only looked up from her machine to give him a polite smile and Bond's skin crawled minutely at this proximity to treachery and at the black and deadly secret locked up beneath the frilly white blouse.

She was an unattractive girl with a pale, rather pimply skin, black hair, and a vaguely unwashed appearance. Such a girl would be unloved, make few friends, have chips on her shoulder—more particularly in view of her illegitimacy—and a grouse against society. Perhaps her only pleasure she harbored in that flattish bosom—the knowledge that she was cleverer than all those around her, that she was, every day, hitting back against the world—the world that despised, or just ignored, her because of her plainness—with all her might. One day they'd be sorry! It was a common neurotic pattern—the revenge of the ugly duckling on society.

Bond wandered off down the corridor to his own office. By tonight that girl would have made a fortune, been paid her thirty pieces of silver a thousandfold. Perhaps the money would change her character, bring her happiness. She would be able to afford the best beauty specialists, the best clothes, a pretty flat. But M. had said he was now going to hot up the Purple Cipher Operation, try a more dangerous level of deception. This would be dicey work. One false step, one incautious lie, an ascertainable falsehood in a

message, and the KGB would smell a rat. Once more, and they would know they were being hoaxed and probably had been ignominiously hoaxed for three years.

Such a shameful revelation would bring quick revenge. It would be assumed that Maria Freudenstein had been acting as a double agent, working for the British as well as the Russians. She would inevitably and quickly be liquidated—perhaps with the cyanide pistol that Bond had been reading about only the day before.

James Bond, looking out of the window across the trees in Regent's Park, shrugged. Thank God it was none of his business. The girl's fate wasn't in his hands. She was caught in the grimy machine of espionage, and she would be lucky if she lived to spend a tenth of the fortune she was going to gain in a few hours at the auction.

There was a line of cars and taxis blocking George Street behind Sotheby's. Bond paid off his taxi and joined the crowd filtering under the awning and up the steps. He was handed a catalogue by the uniformed commissionaire who inspected his ticket, and went up the broad stairs with the fashionable, excited crowd and along a gallery and into the main auction room that was already thronged. He found his seat next to Mr. Snowman, who was writing figures on a pad on his knee, and looked round him.

The lofty room was perhaps as large as a tennis court. It had the look and the smell of age, and the two large chandeliers, to fit in with the period, blazed warmly in contrast to the strip lighting along the vaulted ceiling whose glass roof was partly obscured by a blind, still half drawn against the sun that would be blazing down on the afternoon's sale. Miscellaneous pictures and tapestries hung on the olive green walls, and batteries of television and other cameras (among them the M.I.5 cameraman with a press pass from *The Sunday Times*) were clustered with their handlers on a platform built out from the middle of a giant tapestried hunting scene. There were perhaps a hundred dealers and spectators sitting attentively on small gilt chairs. All eyes were focused on the slim, goodlooking auctioneer talking quietly from the raised wooden pulpit. He was dressed in an immaculate dinner jacket with a red carnation in the buttonhole. He spoke unemphatically and without gestures.

"Fifteen thousand pounds. And sixteen—" a pause. A glance at someone in the front row. "Against you, sir." The flick of a cata-

logue being raised. "Seventeen thousand pounds I am bid. Eighteen. Nineteen. I am bid twenty thousand pounds." And so the quiet voice went calmly, unhurriedly on while down among the audience the equally impassive bidders signaled their responses to the litany.

"What is he selling?" asked Bond, opening his catalogue.

"Lot 40," said Mr. Snowman. "That diamond riviere the porter's holding on the black velvet tray. It'll probably go for about twenty-five. An Italian is bidding against a couple of Frenchmen. Otherwise they'd have got it for twenty. I only went to fifteen. Liked to have got it. Wonderful stones. But there it is."

Sure enough, the price stuck at twenty-five thousand and the hammer, held by its head and not by its handle, came down with soft authority. "Yours, sir," said Mr. Peter Wilson, and a salesclerk hurried down the aisle to confirm the identity of the bidder.

"I'm disappointed," said Bond.

Mr. Snowman looked up from his catalogue. "Why is that?"

"I've never been to an auction before, and I always thought the auctioneer banged his gavel three times and said going, going, gone, so as to give the bidders a last chance."

Mr. Snowman laughed. "You might still find that operating in the Shires or in Ireland, but it hasn't been the fashion at London salerooms since I've been attending them."

"Pity. It adds to the drama."

"You'll get plenty of that in a minute. This is the last lot before the curtain goes up on the Emerald Sphere."

One of the porters had reverently uncoiled a glittering mass of rubies and diamonds on his black velvet tray. Bond looked at the catalogue. It said "Lot 41," which the luscious prose described as:

A PAIR OF FINE AND IMPORTANT RUBY AND DIAMOND BRACELETS, the front of each in the form of an elliptical cluster composed of one larger and two smaller rubies within a border of cushion-shaped diamonds, the sides and backs formed of simpler clusters alternating with diamond openwork scroll motifs springing from single stone ruby centers millegriffe-set in gold, running between chains of rubies and diamonds linked alternately, the clasp also in the form of an elliptical cluster.

According to family tradition, this lot was formerly the property of Mrs. Fitzherbert (1756-1837) whose marriage to the Prince of Wales, afterwards Geo. IV, was definitely estab-

lished when in 1905 a sealed packet deposited at Coutts Bank in 1833 and opened by Royal permission disclosed the marriage certificate and other conclusive proofs.

These bracelets were probably given by Mrs. Fitzherbert to her niece, who was described by the Duke of Orleans as "the prettiest girl in England."

While the bidding progressed, Bond slipped out of his seat and went down the aisle to the back of the room where the overflow audience spread out into the New Gallery and the entrance hall to watch the sale on closed-circuit television. He casually inspected the crowd, seeking any face he could recognize from the two hundred members of the Soviet Embassy staff whose photographs, clandestinely obtained, he had been studying during the past day. But in an audience that defied classification—a mixture of dealers, amateur collectors, and what could be broadly classified as rich pleasure-seekers—there was not a face that he could recognize except from the gossip columns.

One or two sallow faces might have been Russian, but equally they might have belonged to half a dozen European races. There was a scattering of dark glasses, but dark glasses are no longer a disguise. Bond went back to his seat. Presumably the man would have to divulge himself when the bidding began.

"Fourteen thousand I am bid. And fifteen. Fifteen thousand." The hammer came down. "Yours, sir."

There was a hum of excitement and a fluttering of catalogues. Mr. Snowman wiped his forehead with a white silk handkerchief. He turned to Bond. "Now I'm afraid you are more or less on your own. I've got to pay attention to the bidding and anyway for some unknown reason it's considered bad form to look over one's shoulder to see who's bidding against you—so I'll only be able to spot him if he's somewhere up front here, and I'm afraid that's unlikely. Pretty much all dealers, but you can stare around as much as you like. What you've got to do is to watch Peter Wilson's eyes and then try and see who he's looking at, or who's looking at him.

"If you can spot the man, which may be quite difficult, note any movement he makes, even the very smallest. Whatever the man does—scratching his head, pulling at the lobe of his ear, or whatever, will be a code he's arranged with Peter Wilson. I'm afraid he won't do anything obvious like raising his catalogue. Do you get me? And don't forget that he may make absolutely no movement

at all until right at the end when he's pushed me as far as he thinks I'll go, then he'll want to sign off. Mark you," Mr. Snowman smiled, "when we get to the last lap, I'll put plenty of heat on him, and try and make him show his hand. That's assuming, of course, that we are the only two bidders left in." He looked enigmatic. "And I think you can take it that we shall be."

From the man's certainty James Bond felt pretty sure that Mr. Snowman had been given instructions to get the Emerald Sphere at any cost.

A sudden hush fell as a tall pedestal draped in black velvet was brought in with ceremony and positioned in front of the auctioneer's rostrum. Then a handsome oval case of what looked like white velvet was placed on top of the pedestal and, with reverence, an elderly porter in gray uniform with wine-red sleeves, collar, and back belt, unlocked it and lifted out Lot 42, placed it on the black velvet, and removed the case.

The cricket ball of polished emerald on its exquisite base glowed with a supernatural green fire, and the jewels on its surface and on the opalescent meridian winked their various colors.

There was a gasp of admiration from the audience, and even the clerks and experts behind the rostrum and sitting at the tall counting-house desk behind the auctioneer, accustomed to the crown jewels of Europe parading before their eyes, leaned forward to get a better look.

James Bond turned to his catalogue. There it was, in heavy type and in prose as stickily luscious as a butterscotch sundae:

THE TERRESTRIAL GLOBE

DESIGNED IN 1917 BY CARL FABERGE FOR A RUSSIAN GENTLEMAN
AND NOW THE PROPERTY OF HIS GRANDDAUGHTER

42 A VERY IMPORTANT FABERGE TERRESTRIAL GLOBE. A sphere carved from an extraordinarily large piece of Siberian emerald matrix weighing approximately one thousand three hundred carats, and of a superb color and vivid translucence, represents a terrestrial globe supported upon an elaborate *rocaille* scroll mount finely chased in *quatre-couleur* gold and set with a profusion of rose-diamonds and small emeralds of intense color, to form a table clock.

Around this mount six gold *putti* disport themselves among cloud forms which are naturalistically rendered in carved rock-crystal finished matt and veined with fine lines of tiny

rose-diamonds. The globe itself, the surface of which is meticulously engraved with a map of the world with the principal cities indicated by brilliant diamonds embedded within gold collets, rotates mechanically on an axis controlled by a small clock movement, by *G. Moser*, signed, which is concealed in the base, and is girdled by a fixed gold belt enameled opalescent oyster along a reserved path in *champleve* technique over a *moire guillochage* with painted Roman numerals in pale sepia enamel serving as the dial of the clock, and a single triangular pigeon-blood Burma ruby of about five carats set into the surface of the orb, pointing the hour. Height: 7½ in. *Workmaster, Henrik Wigstrom*. In the original double-opening white velvet, satin-lined, oviform case with the gold key fitted in the base.

The theme of this magnificent sphere is one that had inspired Faberge some fifteen years earlier, as evidenced in the miniature terrestrial globe which forms part of the Royal Collection at Sandringham. (See plate 280 in *The Art of Carl Faberge*, by A. Kenneth Snowman.)

After a brief and searching glance round the room Mr. Wilson banged his hammer softly. "Lot 42—an object of vertu by Carl Faberge." A pause. "Twenty thousand pounds I am bid."

Mr. Snowman whispered to Bond, "That means he's probably got a bid of at least fifty. This is simply to get things moving."

Catalogues fluttered. "And thirty, forty, fifty thousand pounds I am bid. And sixty, seventy, and eighty thousand pounds. And ninety." A pause and then: "One hundred thousand pounds I am bid."

There was a rattle of applause round the room. The cameras had swiveled to a youngish man, one of three on a raised platform to the left of the auctioneer who were speaking softly into telephones. Mr. Snowman commented, "That's one of Sotheby's young men. He'll be on an open line to America. I should think that's the Metropolitan bidding, but it might be anybody. Now it's time for me to get to work." Mr. Snowman flicked up his rolled catalogue.

"And ten," said the auctioneer. The man spoke into his telephone and nodded. "And twenty."

Again a flick from Mr. Snowman.

"And thirty."

The man on the telephone seemed to be speaking rather more

words than before into his mouthpiece—perhaps giving his estimate of how much higher the price was likely to go. He gave a slight shake of his head in the direction of the auctioneer, and Peter Wilson looked away from him and round the room.

"One hundred and thirty thousand pounds I am bid," he repeated quietly.

Mr. Snowman said softly to Bond, "Now you'd better watch out. America seems to have signed off. It's time for your man to start pushing me."

James Bond slid out of his place and went and stood among a group of reporters in a corner to the left of the rostrum. Peter Wilson's eyes were directed toward the far right-hand corner of the room. Bond could detect no movement, but the auctioneer announced, "And forty thousand pounds." He looked down at Mr. Snowman. After a long pause Mr. Snowman raised five fingers. Bond guessed that this was part of his process of putting the heat on. He was showing reluctance, hinting that he was near the end of his tether.

"One hundred and forty-five thousand." Again the piercing glance toward the back of the room. Again no movement. But again some signal had been exchanged. "One hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

There was a buzz of comment and some desultory clapping. This time Mr. Snowman's reaction was even slower and the auctioneer twice repeated the last bid. Finally he looked directly at Mr. Snowman. "Against you, sir." At last Mr. Snowman raised five fingers.

James Bond was beginning to sweat. He had got absolutely nowhere and the bidding must surely be coming to an end. The auctioneer repeated the bid.

And now there was the tiniest movement. At the back of the room, a chunky-looking man in a dark suit reached up and unobtrusively took off his dark glasses. It was a smooth, nondescript face—the sort of face that might belong to a bank manager, a member of Lloyd's, or a doctor. This must have been the prearranged code with the auctioneer. So long as the man wore his dark glasses he would raise in tens of thousands. When he took them off, he had quit.

Bond shot a quick glance toward the bank of cameramen. Yes, the M.I.5 photographer was on his toes. He had also seen the movement. He lifted his camera deliberately, and there was the quick glare of a flash. Bond got back to his seat and whispered to Snow-

man, "Got him. Be in touch with you tomorrow. Thanks a lot." Mr. Snowman only nodded. His eyes remained glued on the auctioneer.

Bond slipped out of his place and walked swiftly down the aisle as the auctioneer said for the third time, "One hundred and fifty-five thousand pounds I am bid," and then softly brought down his hammer. "Yours, sir."

Bond got to the back of the room before the audience had risen, applauding, to its feet. His quarry was hemmed in among the gilt chairs. He had now put on his dark glasses again, and Bond put on a pair of his own. He contrived to slip into the crowd and get behind the man as the chattering crowd streamed down the stairs. The hair grew low on the back of the man's rather squat neck and the lobes of his ears were pinched in close to his head. He had a slight hump, perhaps only a bone deformation, high up on his back.

Bond suddenly remembered. This was Piotr Malinowski, with the official title on the embassy staff of "Agricultural Attaché." So!

Outside, the man began walking swiftly toward Conduit Street. James Bond got unhurriedly into a taxi with its engine running and its flag down. He said to the driver, "That's him. Take it easy."

"Yes, sir," said the M.I.5 driver, pulling away from the curb.

The man picked up a taxi in Bond Street. The tail in the mixed evening traffic was easy. Bond's satisfaction mounted as the Russian's taxi turned up north of the park and along Bayswater. It was just a question whether he would turn down the private entrance into Kensington Palace Gardens, where the first mansion on the left is the massive building of the Soviet Embassy. If he did, that would clinch matters. The two patrolling policemen, the usual embassy guards, had been specially picked that night. It was their job just to confirm that the occupant of the leading taxi actually entered the Soviet Embassy.

Then, with the Secret Service evidence and the evidence of Bond and of the M.I.5 cameraman, there would be enough for the Foreign Office to declare Comrade Piotr Malinowski *persona non grata* on the grounds of espionage activity and send him packing. In the grim chess game that is secret service work, the Russians would have lost a queen. It would have been a very satisfactory visit to the auction rooms.

The leading taxi *did* turn in through the big iron gates.

Bond smiled with grim satisfaction. He leaned forward. "Thanks, driver. Headquarters, please."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



The *Killing of Monday Brown* (Walker, \$19.95) is Sandra West Prowell's second Phoebe Siegel mystery, and with it she's staked out her own territory somewhere between Hillerman and Grafton country. The setting is Billings, Montana, where ex-cop Phoebe works as a private investigator. Monday Brown is a dealer in North American artifacts, many of them probably illegally obtained. Now Monday is missing, presumed dead, and a Crow teenager has been arrested. At the request of the boy's family, Phoebe postpones her house renovation and takes on the case. Phoebe, the daughter of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, begins by believing that no one can teach her anything about family obligations and customs. That's before she's admitted into Crow tribal-reservation life, trusted by the boy's wise and ancient grandmother, and invited to join a ceremony in the sweat lodge. A strong and sympathetic protagonist, and a fascinating firsthand look at Crow culture and tribal life, will probably draw the attention of both fans and reviewers.

Fans of Evelyn Smith's *Miss Melville* will appreciate Natasha Cooper's *Bitter Herbs* (Crown, \$21), which brings back Willow King in her second British mystery. Willow's double life—she has written numerous bestselling romances under the pen name Cresida Woodruffe—is no longer a secret to her colleagues at the Home Office. She still maintains her humble old apartment, too, although she's now permanently moved to her more luxurious "Woodruffe" quarters. But there's a fly or two in the ointment. First, her latest manuscript has left both her publisher and her agent unthrilled,

and they want a major rewrite to reflect newer trends in the genre. Worse, she senses Chief Inspector Tom Worth pulling away from her. Proposing that Willow stand back from her manuscript for a time, her publisher hires her to write a puff-piece on Gloria Grainger, an enormously successful romance writer some twenty years earlier who has just died. When Gloria first feels suspicious about the old woman's death, she attributes it to empathy. After all, Gloria was once the darling of the same agent and publisher Willow now has, until styles changed. And certainly Tom, in his current mood, won't listen to Willow's nagging little doubts that the woman was murdered. Cooper writes with a light but wry touch that will probably stretch the credibility of readers who aren't prepared to merely go along for a jolly ride.

Abigail Padgett's second book, **Strawgirl** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95) was so compelling that I went back to find her first book, *Child of Silence* (Mysterious Press, \$4.99). Both feature Bo Bradley, a child abuse investigator in southern California. Like Jonathan Kellerman's books, both stories center around the welfare of a child. But the twist here lies in Bo's childhood and the suicide of her sister, a manic-depressive. That event in young adulthood triggered the disease in Bo, and throughout both novels she is courageously battling her own demons as well as the evil adults menacing the children in her care. Padgett portrays Bo's inner life in strong, lyrical prose that is anything but depressing to read, for Bo compensates with great resourcefulness, physical courage, stubborn determination, and an almost psychic ability to read people. The plots are dramatic and filled with surprises, supporting characters are fully drawn, and the look behind the scenes at bureaucracy and the justice system are added bonuses. I strongly recommend both novels to you, and eagerly await the third.

An interesting period novel already sold to the movies is Caleb Carr's **The Alienist** (Random House, \$22), a big book that packs a lot of entertainment. The time is 1896, when Teddy Roosevelt was the new police commissioner. The place is New York City. The narrator is reporter John Schuyler Moore, a Harvard grad who attended school with both Teddy and Dr. Laszlo Kreizler. In fact, it's Moore's ongoing friendship with the eccentric and controversial Kreizler, even more than his working as a reporter, that has labeled him the black sheep of his wealthy family, for Kreizler is a practitioner of the discipline of psychology. To staunch conservatives and religious fundamentalists, psychology is at best mere mumbo-jumbo; at worst, its practice will cause the breakdown of

morality, the family, and ultimately, society itself. Thus the real battle in *The Alienist* (as psychologists were called) is against ignorance and a society rigidly ruled by superstition, gangland kings, and corrupt bureaucrats. The three old college acquaintances are reunited in a secret investigation to find the serial killer of young male prostitutes. (If his opponents learn that Teddy has employed Kreizler, he would be hounded out of office.) The team is rounded out by a young woman (one of two women hired by the new commissioner, against much opposition, to work in the police department), a pair of Jewish policemen with medical training, and several of Kreizler's former patients who are employed in his service. What follows is a wild and woolly chase to catch a killer by a team that will invent criminology methods (such as drawing a psychological profile of the killer) that the FBI regularly uses today. And along the way readers are treated to a picture of the poor, immigrant, and tough side of New York City that isn't generally part of the history books.

Katherine Hall Page writes gentle New England mysteries that star former New Yorker Faith Fairchild, now wife of the local minister, mother, and part-time caterer. The little town of Alesford is all aflutter: a celebrated director has chosen their town to shoot his next film, his version of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Faith will cater meals for the cast, and lots of townspeople will be involved as movie extras. The movie excitement even threatens to overshadow the town council election—that is, until a string of bad accidents begins to plague the shoot. **The Body in the Cast** comes complete with some of Faith's recipes and should please fans of lighthearted domestic mysteries (St. Martin's, \$19.95).

Albie Marx returns in David Debin's second caper, **The Big O** (Carroll & Graf, \$19.95), to further delight fans of the offbeat crime novel. Albie is an unreformed sixties radical who writes for an alternative tabloid called *Up Yours* run by an hysterical wacko. There's no way to do justice to the cast, which includes some scary big-business types, assorted flaky females, a band of alien-watchers (including Albie's ex), a star baseball rookie with an otherworldly mission, and a murderer with a real shocker of a secret. (That's just the cast list. You should hear the plot.) If you've a taste for the outrageous, you'll like *The Big O*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



China Moon is the story of a good man corrupted by the love of a woman. Or maybe it's the story of a downtrodden woman who finally takes charge of her life. Whatever your point of view, it's a tense tale of romance, intrigue, and murder that can be compared favorably with another Florida-set film, the steamy *Body Heat*.

Madeleine Stowe, whom we last saw as a visually impaired woman stalked by a mysterious killer in *Blink*, has 20/20 vision in this one. But unlike the cocksure cop she fell for in her last film, the one she romances here is a warm, sensitive, and caring man.

In this turn, Stowe's Rachel Munro is a pretty, troubled housewife. Instead of lying in wait and playing victim, however, she calls the shots.

For Rachel and her aristocratic, bank-owner husband, the honeymoon is clearly over. The only question left about this broken marriage is how it will finally end.

The film opens up through the eyes and the camera lens of a private eye hired to spy on Rachel's wayward husband. He has captured a motel tryst for posterity in a handful of grainy black and whites.

This rat, we see right away, is a logical target for a hit—maybe. So filmgoers know not to get too attached to the distinguished looking, two-timing Rupert Munro (Charles Dance).

Homicide cop Kyle Bodine, played by Ed Harris, is a real square who lives alone in a trailer park. He's a top cop who tries to teach his green young partner Lamar Dickey (Benicio

Del Toro) the importance of having "an eye for detail."

If only Bodine had taken his own advice.

After what looks like a chance encounter at a smoky dockside lounge, Bodine takes a shine to Rachel. Although she initially backs off, it doesn't take long before the two are skinny dipping in a secluded moonlit lake.

Isn't love grand?

Our sensitive cop makes an error by mixing business with pleasure, when he and his partner answer a domestic dispute call one night at the elegant Munro home. Bodine's hackles are raised when he finds that the dapper Mr. Munro has hit Mrs. Munro. This raises the ante and the tension all around, as Bodine is more determined to keep his "friend" safe from her abusive husband and Rachel becomes more desperate to get out of the sour marriage.

It's inevitable that Mr. Munro is done away with, and that's where the moody picture becomes edgy and intriguing. Questions abound—is Munro's death accidental, self-defense, a premeditated murder?

While *China Moon* may not

be all that original, it follows the *noir* style faithfully. We get the slow setup in the beginning. We get the crime. Then comes the frantic coverup, which eventually unravels with somewhat unexpected revelations.

The dialogue between Officer Bodine and Mrs. Munro recalls a movie era a few decades old when women were dames and when both men and women chain-smoked on screen. Neither puffs here, although Bodine might be excused if he lit up in the no smoking section after getting tangled up with his ladyfriend.

When the two first meet, he offers a flat: "Hello, want some company?" Not too creative a line, but her response helps set the tone for the story about to unfold. "Am I safe talking to you?" she inquires. "We live in dangerous times."

The title, by the way, comes from a line Bodine utters to Rachel during a moonlit row across a secluded lake. "When the moon is full like a big old plate of china," he says his grandmother used to say, "strange things happen." True enough in this cinematic case.

THE STORY THAT WON



The February Mysterious by Paul Kostrach of Cincinnati goes to Brian Scot Craigert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Augusta, West Virginia; Kana; J. Alec West of Vancouver, Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; James Torline of Wichita, Kansas; R. T. Davis of Pensacola, Florida; Amber D. Gregory of Jacksonville, Illinois; John Gleasman of Rockford, Illinois; Ben R. Leeb III of San Carlos, California; and Susan C. Trotter of Palm Harbor, Florida.

Photograph contest was won nati, Ohio. Honorable men- of Lancaster, California; Rob- Michigan; Ted Kalvitis of thie Muir of Metairie, Louisi- ver, Washington; Bernice F. Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; James Torline of Wichita, Kansas; R. T. Davis of Pensacola, Florida; Amber D. Gregory of Jacksonville, Illinois; John Gleasman of Rockford, Illinois; Ben R. Leeb III of San Carlos, California; and Susan C. Trotter of Palm Harbor, Florida.

END OF THE LINE by Paul Kostrach

Detective Carter looked up from the overgrown railway tracks at the old trolley depot. The unused rail line terminated at the dilapidated building, the trolley sitting half out of the open doors, rusting and peeling in the sun.

"This is it, buddy. The end of the line." Carter spoke the words softly, inspecting the bushes on either side of the station. He had spent eight months tracking the city's most brazen serial killer, known chiefly for displaying his victims like department store window dummies, set up in whatever tableau took his fancy. And the trail ended here.

It seemed to Carter that there was something in the trolley, and so he moved cautiously forward, gun in hand. Inside, he had to set his gun down on the front seat, then turn and reach back out the door. Nearly every seat had a passenger, each in a different state of decomposition, each posed as if commuting to work. There was even a corpse in a conductor's uniform. One of the bodies toward the back was holding a placard, and the detective went back to read it. GOT YOU, it said. Carter spun around to face the conductor, now up and holding Carter's own gun. "Welcome aboard," said the man.

Carter had a brief thought: it *was* the end of the line. For him. The conductor smiled, holding something aloft in his other hand. "Newspaper?" he asked.

Photo by William D. Middleton, from THE TIME OF THE TROLLEY

(continued from page 4)

different, AHMM being more in the classic vein."

"I look forward to AHMM, but more to EQMM—when will they run a survey?"

In spite of everything, though, your comments were invaluable to us. Many were interesting, and many ("This is the best magazine I've ever subscribed to!" "Keep up the good work." "Wish mag were weekly!") warmed our hearts. Here, for instance:

"I read both AHMM and EQMM regularly. Love the short story format—read mainly while I soak in the tub daily to wind down from work. Am a director of nursing, and you are my therapy; the stories help me to regain my sanity and perspective; I am human again once I emerge from the tub, since reading relaxes and revives me. Nothing else can substitute for a good short story from one of these two magazines.

"I pass the issues on to my retired mother-in-law, and she passes them on to her hairdresser, who after reading them leaves them in the salon for others to enjoy. God bless you! Thank you!"

Thank you! You're welcome!

But that leads us to an apology. We were fussed at (a lot) for putting the survey on the back of a story page, since it

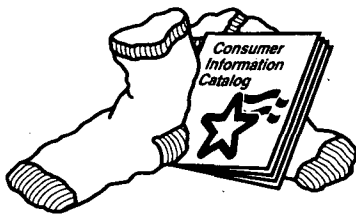
turns out that many readers, like the above writer, pass their issues along to hospitals, nursing homes, libraries, and other institutions or to friends and relatives. That gratifies us; we had no idea how often it evidently happens. We're sorry about the survey's placement. We won't do it again.

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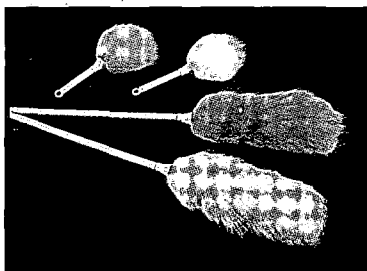
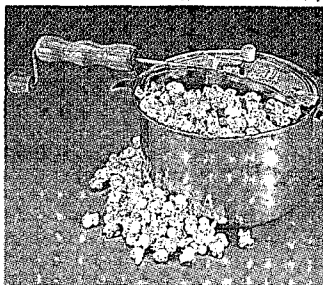
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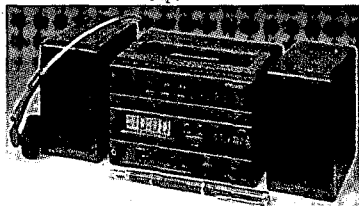


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